

Forgotten Stories of Mystery and Suspense by Queens of Crime and the Masters of Golden Age Detection



INCLUDES UNCOLLECTED STORIES BY MARGERY ALLINGHAM & DENNIS WHEATLEY

BODIES FROM THE LIBRARY 6

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Forgotten stories of mystery and suspense
by the Queens of Crime
and other Masters of the Golden Age

Selected and introduced by

Tony Medawar



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These stories were written mostly in the first half of the twentieth century and characters sometimes use offensive language or otherwise are described or behave in ways that reflect the prejudices and insensitivities of the period.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Her Grace tells me that a respectable Battersea architect has discovered a dead man in his bath.’ ‘Indeed, my Lord? That’s very gratifying.’
Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?*

Welcome to the sixth volume of *Bodies from the Library*, the series of criminous anthologies from Collins Crime Club. Together with *Ghosts from the Library*, its supernatural counterpart, *Bodies from the Library* aims to bring you lost treasures from the libraries and archives of the world.

In this new anthology of unknown, unpublished and uncollected stories by writers from the Golden Age of crime and mystery fiction, there is a previously unknown novella by Anthony Gilbert and—unseen for almost a century—the original unexpurgated text of Margery Allingham’s short novel *The Mystery Man of Soho*, as well as a hitherto unpublished radio play by John Rhode and a long forgotten round-robin novella by five thriller writers including Geoffrey Household and Dennis Wheatley. And you will also find E. C. Bentley’s affectionate parody of Lord Peter Wimsey, the creation of his friend Dorothy L. Sayers, together with little-known stories by Christianna Brand, Cyril Hare, Alice Campbell, Andrew Garve and others.

In the last ten years the Golden Age has been resurgent, thanks mainly to the British Library (who also sponsor the annual ‘Bodies from the Library’ literary event) and small print presses like the American publisher Crippen & Landru, founded by Douglas G. Greene, and Dean Street Press, where the late and much missed Rupert Heath has brought many lost writers back into print. Geoff Bradley’s *CADS* magazine (standing for *Crime And Detective Stories*) has brought together some fine scholarship, helping the elevate the reputation of detective fiction and many of its forgotten exponents, and many online blogs highlight the best and worst of crime fiction past and present—Kate Jackson (the Armchair Sleuth) and Steve Barge (the Puzzle Doctor) to name but two. Most important of all, dozens

of contemporary authors—including Ann Cleeves, Victoria Dowd, Martin Edwards, Jane Harper, Peter James and Tom Mead—continue to build on the legacy of the Golden Age with thrilling and ingenious new stories of crime and detection, helping us all to continue to enjoy the life of crime.

Tony Medawar
April 2023

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NO EVIDENCE

Alice Campbell

Out of the blanketing fog she slipped with an air of relief into the cinema lobby, a refuge warm, mistily bright. A trail of damp vapour followed her through the door, a haunting reminder of the world she had left behind. Her face tingled with the rawness, but she did not feel cold. She was even a little out of breath with hurrying.

‘I suppose there are no two-and-fourpenny seats left?’ she asked at the box-office—from habit, for tonight she was quite prepared to pay three-and-six, or even five-and-nine.

‘Plenty of two-and-fours this evening, ma’am. This is about the only weather that hits our business,’ the girl informed her, and shot a blue ticket through the aperture.

She laid down half-a-crown. In spite of the temperature her hands were bare, the narrow wedding ring hanging loose on her third finger. Absently she picked up her change.

‘Yes, it’s a beastly fog, isn’t it? But I fancy it will be gone by morning.’

The commissionaire recognised her and smiled, touching his braided cap. More than once he had chatted with her on crowded nights while she waited for a seat. That was when she had worked late and come straight on from the office. The films helped her to sleep when she was over-tired, so she had told him. She didn’t look too strong, though she had plenty of spirit. A lady, too, one of the proper sort. He saw too many of the half-and-halfs not to know the difference.

‘If you hurry, madam, you’ll be in time for the big picture,’ he informed her, holding open the baize door.

In the smoke-laden darkness she blundered to a seat, scarcely heeding the guiding star of the usher’s torch. Once there she sank back with a deep

breath, closing her eyes. Her hands, resting upon her bag, clasped together tightly.

How tired she was! Too exhausted to relax … The chief was right, she really must take a complete rest, go away somewhere. Well, perhaps she might manage it after all. She could safely leave Martin for a couple weeks now. Ada would look after him and see that he got up in time for school. He was a big boy now, fourteen, tall for his age. Tall and strongly built, like … He had her eyes, though. There was a look of her father about him. Only rarely did she catch a glimmer of something less welcome, disquieting—that impish and infantile something she had learned to distrust. Thank Heaven he had outgrown it, left it behind …

She forced herself to take long, regular breaths, to let herself go. That was it, she must let go. Stupid to have to keep repeating the fact that there was nothing to bother about, no need to tighten up. Of course if she had gone straight home she would have lain awake for hours, nerves jumping. No good doing that. The music soothed her. That strain was from the New World Symphony, garbled a bit, but what a dulcet, gentle theme, cradling one to a sense of security. Dvořák had got it from the American Deep South. ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’—that was it. Martin was whistling it the other day, without knowing what it was. So peaceful, so … Her thoughts trailed off. Once more she found herself rigid, clutching her bag with fingers of steel. Here, this wouldn’t do! What was the film about, anyway?

For a time she fixed her eyes determinedly on the screen. The shifting tints of monochrome flashed by, devoid of meaning, while through them she gazed at other scenes, fresh in her memory. Nerves, nerves! With an effort she wrenched herself free, strove to direct her imagination. Since she must think, let it be to some purpose. A new article, a point of view she could turn into money.

Fleet Street, the grimy offices … What a tiresome lot of drivel she had ground out lately! Who on earth read the stuff? ‘Puddings for the Growing Boy’—‘Books Which Form the Future’—‘Holiday Outfit for Switzerland’—as though she knew anything whatever upon these subjects! Switzerland, though … that was an idea. Why not postpone this holiday of hers and take Martin to Mürren? He had been talking about it for two years, only she had been too hard up. The white sunlit spaces, the cold remote peaks would give her the placidity she wanted, smooth out her tangled

mind. Tomorrow she would get some of those fascinating booklets, she and Martin would pore over them together.

She pulled herself up suddenly. No, not tomorrow. What was she thinking of? There would be far too much to do. Next week, though? Where was she? Oh, yes, Fleet Street. What a day it had been! She had not been able to finish. Then this wretched fog. That's why she had walked all the way, rather than trust herself to a bus. Every step of the way. Why, it must have taken her ten minutes to cross Trafalgar Square! Anyhow it was—what time was it when she had entered that huge, crowded Corner House? It was—yes, it was eight o'clock exactly, she had noticed the clock. How slow the service had been! One wouldn't believe it possible to wait so long for a simple order like two poached eggs and a pot of tea. How many similar orders did the waitresses fill in the course of an evening? She had felt herself one of a horde, as though her identity were lost and she should be ticketed with a number.

Painstakingly, with concentration, she dwelt on these details, visualising every step of her difficult progress through the obscured traffic—Fleet Street to the Corner House, from the Corner House here. Curious how, as the thing took definite form, it brought her back to the ground of normality, dispersed the swarm of fancies that had tormented her. That was proof that her will was strong, that she was well able to take herself in hand. When she got home she would have some hot milk and perhaps one aspirin. Then she would sleep soundly and wake rested, ready to go on …

When she emerged from the cinema the fog had thinned a little. One could see the buildings opposite and even the clumsy buses trundling along the Tottenham Court Road, comfortably sure of their course. At the corner she boarded a Number Nineteen, which would take her without change to Paultons Square. Revived now and collected, she began to figure tentatively and with a thrill of anticipation the probable expenses of the holiday in Switzerland. Of course—and for a second, fear gripped her heart—something might happen which would upset the scheme; still there was no harm in planning. She would not mention it to Martin just yet, in case of disappointment.

With her latch-key she let herself into her tiny house, switched on the light, glanced into the dining-room. It was warm and inviting, the coals in the grate glowing red. On the table stood a plate of sandwiches and a

thermos bottle, left by Ada in case she had had nothing to eat. Ada was good! She must take care not to wake her.

She made up the fire into a cheerful blaze, for there was something she wanted to do before going to bed. Not yet, though. She would take off her things and listen to see if Martin was asleep.

'That you, Mums? I heard you come in.'

It was the boy's sleepy voice calling to her as she mounted the stairs. She opened the door of his room softly.

'S'sh—you ought to be asleep. It's a quarter to twelve!'

'I have been. I say, come inside a moment. Put on the light.'

She did so, the illumination disclosing an untidy litter of books and clothing, intersected by the wires of a home-made radio. From the bed looked out a frostily rosy face, blue eyes blinking in the sudden light beneath tousled fair hair.

Her first observation was mechanical.

'Martin! Your new Etons—all dumped down on a chair, and Bildad sleeping on top of them!'

A reproachful Sealyham, ousted from his couch, lumbered to the floor and looked about for a refuge.

'Sorry, Mums! I do always hang them up, only tonight I got so interested listening in I forgot Bildad. You rotter! Come here!'

He made room invitingly, but the dog, injured in his deepest feelings, had taken himself under the bed.

'Why didn't you come home to dinner? Been to the pictures? Lucky! I say, what did you see? Was it exciting?'

She smiled and sat down on the bed, smoothing the tumbled covers.

'Let me see—what was the name of it? You know what a memory I've got for titles. It was that girl with the—'

'Where'd you go? Marble Arch? Oh, that little place! Why, you must have seen Rita Bolo in "Broken Pinions". Awful slush. Why didn't you go to a real film?'

'Bolo—yes, that's the name. Little blonde thing with curls, rather like Bubbles.'

He withered her with scorn.

'Rita Bolo? You're all off! She's the skinny girl with big eyes, drops from an aeroplane into the water. I say, were you asleep?'

‘Not quite.’ She laughed apologetically. ‘I was too tired to notice much, though. I just let it wash over me.’

Pulling off her small dark felt hat she slid her cold fingers through her hair, ruffling it back off her forehead. It was fair and soft, a nimbus framing her delicate features and modifying their look of serious intentness. He examined her with detached approval.

‘I like you better without your hat. You are tired, though. Had a rotten day?’

‘I have, rather.’

‘Beastly! I tell you what—give the bally old office a miss tomorrow and stay in bed. You ought to, honest. Nobody’ll mind.’

‘It’s not so easy, dear. Anyhow, I’ll be all right in the morning.’

He scowled.

‘I hate your slaving the way you do. You usedn’t to. It doesn’t seem right … I’ve made up my mind about one thing, though. I’m not going to any university, no matter what you say. As soon as I’ve finished that jolly old school—that’ll be four years—I’m going to find a job. By the time I’m twenty I mean to be earning my living and helping you as well.’

She smiled, her small, set face softening wonderfully. She put out her hand and touched his cheek.

‘Do you, Martin? Well, we’ll see. Perhaps it won’t be necessary.’

‘I mean it, though, you can’t stop me.’ He pulled at the cuffs of his striped pyjamas, a sort of embarrassed hesitancy overtaking him. ‘Mums—what do you think? I saw Daddy again today. That makes three times this week. I was surprised!’

She stiffened suddenly, the eyes which a moment before had appeared very young hardening with a glint of steel. Yet her reply was cheerfully casual.

‘Did you? Where?’

He did not look up.

‘He was waiting for me when I came out into Victoria Street … I say, he is rather marvellous, isn’t he? Awfully … I’d forgotten what he was like … Different, though. I don’t just know why … Not a bit like other boys’ fathers. They’re so serious, so … he’s all gay, laughing about little things they’d never notice. It’s fun to be with him, sort of exciting, somehow. You know, all froth and foolishness. I can’t quite explain what I mean. Did you find him like that, ever? Before he went away?’

‘Oh, yes, rather. He was—like that.’

She fingered her hat, pulling it carefully into shape.

‘He took me to Rumpelmayer’s in a taxi.’ We had a simply ripping tea, all kinds of creamy cakes, some with squidgy brown stuff over them. What do you call it? Oh, yes, marron. It was great. Then we went to Hamleys, in another taxi, and looked at the model yachts. Oh, beauties! They go like anything. He’s promised me one, as soon as I decide which kind I want. He’s coming with me to sail it. It will be fun! We knocked around till seven o’clock, then he left me at the Underground, because he had an appointment. He gave me a pound. ‘Wasn’t it topping of him?’

‘Topping.’

‘He hasn’t got to live in the south of France any more now, his health is so much better. He says he’s taking a flat off Park Lane, I’m to go there heaps when it’s finished. It’ll be rather marvellous—all modern colours, with big mirrors and paintings on the walls. Hardly any chairs, just big divans, and lots of cushions, like they have in the East. Sounds queer, don’t you think? I’m not sure I shall like it, but he says I shall … Mums, why exactly did Dad go off? Was it his nerves?’

There was an infinitesimal pause before she answered.

‘A sort of nerves, I think, Martin. As you say, he’s—different.’

He nodded, with a flash of understanding.

‘I know. He can’t stand things, can he? Yet he’s always laughing. When I told him how bad I was at Latin he thought it was a tremendous joke … He said some rather odd things. For one thing, he called your paper a rag, and said nobody he knew ever looked at it. He said—’

‘Darling, it’s late, you won’t want to get up in the morning. Let me tuck you in so you can go to sleep.’

What a child he was, in spite of his protecting ways and the swelling muscles it was his pride to display! A boy at this age was still transparent. With a girl one was never sure what lay beneath the smooth surface.

‘Right, mums, one second till I tell you. He said … What’s that? Not the front door bell?’

She had started slightly. From the kitchen far below sounded a faint, persistent peal. Both listened, alert.

‘Who on earth’s coming here this late at night? Shall I run down and see?’

He was half out of bed, but she pulled him back.

‘No, you’ll catch cold. I’ll go.’

Clasping her hat and bag she descended to the hall, undid the chain and opened the door a crack. From the damp darkness a deep voice addressed her formally.

‘Does Mrs Clavering live here?’

She opened the door a little wider, peering out.

‘I am Mrs Clavering.’

Two stalwart policemen towered above her on the step. One consulted a slip of paper he held in his hand.

‘Mrs Hubert Clavering?’ he queried slowly.

‘Certainly. What is it you want?’

The pair glanced at each other, and the spokesman cleared his throat.

‘Perhaps we’d better come inside, madam.’

‘Of course, come in.’

Big and blundering, with solemn faces, they looked down upon her in the light.

She knit her brow in question.

‘It might be wiser if we went into a room where you could sit down, madam,’ the first officer suggested, after another half-glance at his companion.

‘If you like. Come into the dining-room,’ and she led the way, turning when she reached the table, her free hand clutching its edge.

‘You appear to have been out,’ remarked the first policeman, fumbling his helmet and letting his gaze stray from her hat to the sandwiches behind her.

‘As a matter of fact I’ve only just come in. I have been to the cinema.’

‘Oh, the cinema. Then I take it you’ve not heard anything?’

‘Heard anything?’ she repeated. ‘No. I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I see. May I inquire, madam, just to make sure, if your husband is the Mr Hubert Clavering residing at 126 Half Moon Street?’

‘I believe my husband has got rooms somewhere in that neighbourhood. I have not seen him, though, for some time. Several years in fact.’

Her mouth was dry, she braced herself to meet what was coming.

‘You haven’t seen him at all? Ah … Well, madam, I have some bad news for you. Better prepare yourself. There has been an accident …’

Her grip on the table tightened.

‘Accident? Not knocked down in the fog?’

‘No, madam. It happened at his rooms. He’s been found by his landlady —dead.’

She gasped, her eyes widening.

‘Dead! But—my boy saw him this afternoon. He was quite well at seven o’clock.’

‘It’s happened since then. Some time this evening.’

‘You don’t mean—suicide?’

‘We don’t know for certain, madam. The fact is we begin to think it may be—’

The other policeman, the elder by some years, laid a heavy hand on his arm.

‘Don’t go frightening the lady, Peters,’ he muttered.

‘I’m all right. Only—I can’t take it in. How was he killed?’ she demanded in a whisper, her strained eyes searching first one face then the other. ‘Tell me all you know, please.’

The two exchanged glances, and the elder man nodded.

‘Well, madam, the fact is—stabbed!’

‘Stabbed!’

The second officer made a movement towards the sideboard.

‘Here, let me get you something to drink,’ he said, laying hold of a decanter. ‘Is this brandy, I wonder?’—and he sniffed it, poured some into a glass and pressed it upon her with brusque kindliness. ‘Drink it, ma’am—it’ll pull you together like.’

She sipped a little of the brandy, afraid to take much.

She had need of all her faculties. If only this feeling of unreality would pass! What was the man saying?

‘That’s better, madam. I see you’ve got some pluck. It was bound to be a nasty shock, even if your husband wasn’t—I mean to say—’ He floundered awkwardly.

‘You needn’t mind,’ she heard herself saying collectedly. ‘My husband left us five years ago. He has been living on the Continent. I believe he returned to London quite recently. What do you want me to do?’

The younger officer answered her, apologetically.

‘I’m afraid we’ve got to ask you to come along with us to Half Moon Street, to identify the body. It’s regrettable, but we don’t know anyone else to call upon. Found your name in the telephone directory.’

‘It’s a mere formality,’ his companion assured her. ‘We’ll have you back home again inside an hour.’ Then as though touched by her white, fragile face he added, ‘I’m sure we’d ’a spared you this if it’d been possible.’

‘I quite understand. Of course I must come. Only let me make an excuse to my boy. I’d rather he didn’t hear about this till tomorrow.’

‘Certainly, madam.’

Her knees shook as she mounted the stairs. She felt a bit light-headed, yet her voice was natural as she called through the closed door,

‘It was nothing, Martin. Only a telegram for the wrong address. See how quickly you can get off to sleep now, dear.’

‘Right, Mums. Good-night,’ the boy replied sleepily, and with a sigh of thankfulness she descended once more, putting on her hat as she went.

There was a taxi waiting in the square. Into it the brother officers handed her with deference not unmixed with admiration. In another moment they were bowling along the King’s Road in the direction of Sloane Square.

‘The fog’s nearly gone,’ she remarked after a long silence, glancing through the blurred window.

The younger policeman nodded. He had a pleasant, healthy face with sea-blue eyes and a straw-coloured moustache.

‘One of the patchy ones this time. Pretty thick up West round about eight or nine o’clock, though.’

‘I know. I walked from Fleet Street to Shaftesbury Avenue. It took me quite a long time.’

‘It would, madam.’

They zigzagged across Belgravia, rounded Green Park, and presently turned out of Piccadilly into Half Moon Street.

‘This is the house, madam. His rooms were on the first floor. If you’ll come this way—’

The hall was dark. A ghoulish little girl in a dressing-gown held open the door, staring at the trio with frank curiosity.

‘My advice to you, young woman, is to get off to bed,’ admonished the elder officer gruffly.

She sniffed in defiance.

‘I’m allowed to stay up,’ She informed him coldly. ‘I’m making tea for mother. She’s been having hysterics, but she’s better now.’

‘A good job, too.’ He inclined his head towards Mrs Clavering, lowering his voice. ‘Best take a firm hold on your nerves, ma’am. Sure you won’t go

to pieces?’

A ghost of a smile stirred her rigid mouth.

‘No, no, you needn’t worry. It’s got to be done.’

‘That’s right, madam. We’ll go up.’

In single file they climbed the stuffy, carpeted stairs, while from above a woman’s voice reached them, shrill, with a hint of weeping.

‘Fascinating—that’s what he was. No mistake about that!

Such a way with him, always laughing and making jokes. And the generous way he threw his money about! Of course my brother would have it there was something a wee bit odd about him but I don’t know, I’m sure … I’d ’a’ said he was that easy-going he hadn’t a enemy in the world … I never dreamed he was married, though. Hadn’t a married look, somehow … Oh!’—and the voice rose ominously—‘shall I ever get that sight out of my mind, ever, as long as I live?’

A quiet hand laid hold of the widow’s slight arm.

‘Never mind her, madam. You know what that excitable sort’s like.’

She trembled under his touch, but hardly seemed to hear him. On the landing she paused.

‘Which room is it?’

‘Oh! I was forgetting as how you didn’t know the place. I’ll lead the way, if you’ll pardon me going first.’

The room they entered was a sitting-room furnished in better-class apartment style. There was a mahogany table, a chintz-covered sofa with black satin cushions and a pouf, a Turkish coffee tray on a stand. Over the mantel hung a piece of fine old Persian embroidery, no doubt the tenant’s own, and there were books and a profusion of flowers, the scent of which mingled with the odour of cigarettes and some other, heavier perfume, indefinable. Against the wall, over a low writing-table, was the black-framed photograph of a young boy in white shorts, shirt open at the neck. The picture was flanked by candles, altar fashion, and in front of it stood a vase containing madonna lilies.

Two men looked up at their entrance. One, evidently a doctor, was bending over a bag of instruments, the other, in the uniform of a police inspector, held a narrow, glittering object close to the reading-lamp, examining it through a glass. Neither paid the slightest attention to the rambling utterance of an overblown, youngish woman who hovered in the opposite doorway, her bosom heaving beneath her mauve knitted jumper.

She had short, coarse black hair swept off her forehead like a Fury's, and large, bold eyes, now tear-filled and fixed inquisitively upon the newcomer's quiet figure.

The inspector came forward.

'Mrs Clavering? I'm sorry to have to subject you to this. I'm afraid this business must have given you a bad turn.'

Her eyes met his with grave self-possession.

'It was a shock, certainly. However, I had better tell you at once that my husband has been living apart from me, in France, for several years.'

'I see. But you were not divorced?'

'No, not divorced.' She hesitated. 'He left me five years ago.'

'And since then have you had any communication with him?'

'There has been an occasional business letter, but I have had no knowledge of his movements. I should not have known he was in England if it had not been for my boy, who has seen him several times.'

The doctor, a thin, grey-haired man, glanced at her sympathetically, but offered no comment. Apparently it was the sort of history with which he was not unfamiliar.

'And in your husband's letters has there been any suggestion of a quarrel? Ever mention anyone who owed him a grudge?'

'No. He never referred to his private affairs.'

'Well! It can't be helped. There doesn't seem much help you can give us, beyond formally identifying the body. That, I'm afraid, I must ask you to do.'

He moved aside, and she saw, behind him, against the window, a couch upon which lay a long object shrouded in a sheet. The inspector drew back one end of the covering.

'Would you mind stepping this way?'

She did so. There, lying upon his back, was a tall, well-made man of perhaps forty, dressed in brown tweeds. The face showed a clear olive skin bronzed by the sun, but exceedingly smooth and free from lines. The eyes, greenish-brown, opaque, were open and staring, the corners of the mouth drawn up into an expression oddly simulating amused astonishment. The dark hair receded in points on the temples, but was trained long in front of the shapely ears. One hand dangled loosely over the couch's side. It was fine and tapering, with nails perfectly manicured. On the breast of the shirt was a wide red stain.

With fixed attention she scanned the mask-like visage. She was aware that the landlady was watching her with a fascinated gaze, but she did not look round. After a second she spoke.

‘Yes—oh, yes. It is he. There is no mistake.’ With an effort she tore her eyes away from the couch and turned towards the inspector. ‘Do you know what sort of weapon it was done with?’

‘It was sticking in the wound. A kind of short poniard, which, it seems, he used as a paper-knife. It’s there behind you—but don’t touch, please.’

She saw it then, propped against a glass ashtray, its damascene blade clotted with blood. The handle was of yellowed, ivory, grooved in a diamond pattern.

Suddenly the landlady broke the silence.

‘You’d never think a woman’d have the strength to do it with a thing like that—not so sharp, neither,’ she remarked tearfully.

All five turned to face her.

‘Woman?’ echoed the widow with a note of question.

‘Perhaps you’d like to hear what Mrs Noble has to say,’ suggested the inspector quietly.

The woman in the doorway needed no further encouragement. She sniffed, mopped her eyes and began.

‘Of course, I couldn’t swear it was a woman—but someone was with him when he came in about half-past seven or thereabouts. Someone with a light step. My little girl and me both heard two people go upstairs, but I was at the telephone, and she was feeding the canary. It was Joan said to me as how Mr Clavering must have a lady friend with him, and I said to myself that being as it was such a bad night maybe he’d want dinner sent in for once. I waited, half expecting to hear the bell, but nothing happened.’

‘And you saw no one leave the house?’

‘No, because my little girl and me was down below in the basement. We heard the front door close, and thought the two of them was gone out together. I never bothered no more about it till I brought up his hot-water bottle, about eleven o’clock. Then I found the light on and him sprawling on the rug, there, where you’re standing. First I thought he’d had a fit, then I saw that knife in his chest.’

The doctor spoke, evenly, wiping his glasses and putting them away in their case.

‘You see, Mrs Clavering, that is all we know. No one was seen, nothing was heard. It is entirely supposition. When I got here your husband appeared to have been dead about three hours. The weapon penetrated the heart.’

‘And you do not think it might have been suicide?’

‘It is difficult to say. Of course the wound may have been self-inflicted, but in my opinion it is unlikely.’ He looked at the inspector. ‘You were studying the handle, inspector. Any marks visible?’

The inspector picked up the poniard again, holding it with a pair of forceps.

‘Nothing whatever that I can see. Either it has been very carefully wiped, or else—’

‘Well, if he did it himself, he couldn’t ’a’ wiped it after, could he?’ interrupted the landlady in a tone of triumph. ‘That’s what I say.’

No one replied. The widow appeared to be thinking deeply.

‘Perhaps this may help you, inspector. My boy tells me he spent the afternoon with his father. They separated at seven o’clock, after which it seems my husband had an appointment with someone.’

There was a stir of interest.

‘Ah! Did he mention with whom?’

‘No, but it might be possible to find out.’

The inspector shook his head dubiously.

‘Of course, if he wrote the appointment down … By the way, here is his diary. I may as well have a look.’

All eyes watched as he turned the pages of the little book in search of entries.

‘Here we are—November 17th “See tailor about pyjamas.” That’s all.’ He closed the diary, disappointed. ‘Still, we’ll make inquiries. Thank you for the information.’

His eyes wandered about the room and came to rest on the shrined photograph beneath the lilies. He took a step towards it, examining it with attention.

‘I seem to know that lad’s face. Wasn’t that Lord Brincombe’s heir, who —?’

Mrs Clavering nodded simply.

‘Yes. It is a picture of young Ivor Derryth.’

‘I thought I wasn’t wrong. Found in the river at Windsor, some five or six years back.’

He came back to the centre of the room, ruminated a moment, then addressed her kindly.

‘Well, Mrs Clavering, I hardly think there is any reason to detain you further. All this must be very painful for you.’ He lowered his voice confidentially. ‘Naturally you will have to appear at the inquest; but considering the circumstances you will only need to repeat the statement you have made to me, and there will be an end of it. I’ll have a word with the coroner and ask him to make it as brief as possible.’

Out of her white face her eyes looked up at him gratefully. ‘Thank you. And you think I may go now?’

‘Certainly. One of these officers will see you home. Peters—!’

‘Oh, please don’t trouble! I shall just jump into a taxi.’

‘It’s a pleasure, madam,’ the younger policeman gruffly assured her.

Again she was whirling along wet, shining streets, upon which reflections shone in long splashes of light. She leaned back, wearily.

Her escort’s stolid face regarded her with compassion. Plucky though she was, she was evidently all in.

‘I wouldn’t go upsetting myself overmuch, madam,’ he counselled awkwardly. ‘From what I can gather you’ve not suffered any great loss.’

She shook her head faintly.

‘No. It’s only the strain I’ve been on. I shall be all right … Tell me: If it turns out that this was murder—should you say there was much chance of discovering who did it?’

He pursed his lips cautiously.

‘Well, madam, you never know. Though if it’s my own private opinion you’re asking, I’ll have to say it seems a bit on the doubtful side.’

‘Why exactly?’

‘Well, madam, just look at the facts. This gentleman, your late husband that was, comes in with a party, male or female, we can’t say which. Now the early part of this evening the fog was so thick you couldn’t hardly see the railing of the areas. Isn’t that so?’

‘Yes. But I don’t see—’

‘Well, I see, if you’ll pardon me. It’s the first thing I did see. I says to myself, suppose those two met, not in a restaurant or a club or any lighted place where there’s people about, but on the street somewhere? Suppose,

for the sake of argument, this was a woman he'd picked up? If it happened like that, there's no witness to prove who the party was. Just a ship that passes in the night, as you might say, and a foggy night at that. Of course we don't know.'

'But the motive?'

'Ah, there you have me, madam. Who's to say? It may be your husband has something this person wanted to get hold of. Letters, maybe. Or it might be some woman he'd done the dirty by. Unless we can find out who he had that appointment with, we've got precious little to go on.'

'I see,' she answered thoughtfully. 'What you mean is that as far as we know there's no real evidence.'

'That's it, madam. No fingerprints, no known motive, no witness. So far as we know at present.'

'Strange,' she murmured, drawing her hand across her eyes. 'It seems hard to realise …'

'Oh, I don't know, madam. There's a sight of cases where nothing's ever proved. Many's the body fished up out of the Thames, as the river-police will tell you—' He stopped, seeing that she shivered slightly.

'Pardon me, I hadn't ought to have mentioned such a thing, and your nerves all to pieces like … Here we are at Paultons Square, Now if I was you, madam, I'd have a good cup of strong tea and get off to bed. Got your latch-key, madam?'

Once more she was back in the little dining-room, the door carefully closed. This time her teeth chattered, and as she knelt to thaw her frozen hands before the flickering fire her knees gave way so that she sank in a trembling heap upon the rug. Her lips moved without sound.

'Thank God it's over,' they formed the words. 'Thank God—thank God …'

For several minutes she remained as she was, listening. The house was absolutely quiet. Then crouching close to the warm hearth she opened her bag, took from it a letter, perused it slowly. It was written in a flowing and beautiful hand, and read as follows:

Dear Millicent,

You can no longer control my movements, nor keep me from seeing Martin. He is my son as well as yours, and I don't see why he should be blighted entirely by your drab outlook. What you say about my

corrupting him is sheer childish nonsense, and would make me angry if it weren't so altogether funny! No, it's no use, my dear. You have had the whip hand of me for years, but since Aunt Isobel left me independent I can snap my fingers at you and live where I choose. Still, if you insist, I will meet you and go over all this tiresome business again—though it is only fair to warn you it will be *peine perdue*.

Hubert.

She held the sheet over the flames, watched it consume to ashes. Then she nerved herself to another, a final task.

From the bag she had clutched so tightly all that long evening she drew forth a small object, something soft and slightly sticky, rolled into a ball. With a quick gesture she thrust it into the heart of the fire. Igniting slowly, the ball uncurled, divided itself into two parts.

It was a pair of gloves, thick with blood.

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ALICE CAMPBELL

Alice Dorothy Ormond—best known in America as Alice Ormond Campbell and in Britain as Alice Campbell—was born on 29 November 1887 in Atlanta, Georgia, a city that some of her ancestors had helped to found. Her parents were James Emanuel Campbell and Florence Root.

The youngest of four children, hers was a precocious talent. Her first poem, 'The Story of Tallulah Falls', was published when she was only ten and her first short story, 'The Autobiography of a Very Old Doll', appeared two years later. Both were published in the *Atlanta Constitution*, a newspaper whose city editor was her elder brother, Samuel. However coincidental (or not) that might have been, it was not long before her poems started to be reprinted in other newspapers and by 1901, the fourteen-year-old was reported to be writing a 'two volume novel'. If that was ever completed it did not find a publisher, but after graduating from Atlanta Girls' High School, short stories did appear from time to time, including 'White Nurse' in the prestigious *Ladies Homes Journal*, 'Roulade' in *Uncle Remus' Magazine* and 'The Silver Lamp' in the *Topeka State Journal*. At the age of nineteen and accompanied by her widowed mother, Alice Ormond moved to New York to study music and foreign languages, and to continue writing. A year later she moved to Paris, where she renewed acquaintance with a young Virginian whom she had first met in New York. James Lawrence Campbell was also a writer and he had ambitions to become a playwright. They were married in 1913 and their first child, named Lawrence, was born in 1914.

With what become known as the First World War engulfing Europe, the couple moved to 32 Albion Road in the central London suburb of St John's Wood where they had two more children, Florence and Robert. As their family grew, the couple decided to move out of the capital, settling in *Edendale*, a house in Worple Road in Epsom, Surrey. Though she was an

anglophile, and had Scottish forebears on her father's side, Alice Campbell remained very proud of her American roots—her great grandmother had been murdered by native Seminoles. She lived most of the rest of her life in London and is usually thought of as a British writer. Her books often have European settings and a mix of American and British protagonists, while there is always a young woman confronted by danger and mystery. Her first, *Juggernaut* (1928), was filmed in 1936 with Boris Karloff as the central character, a doctor who is only too ready to take care of his patients. Others include *The Murder of Caroline Bundy* (1933), a mystery that includes a search for the Holy Grail, and *They Paid the Price* (1937), which features the theft of a valuable Manet painting from a Parisian gallery and was published as *Death Framed in Silver* (1937). Particularly noteworthy are the superb wartime thriller *The Chimney Crashed* (1937), published in book form as *Travelling Butcher* (1944), in which an air raid leads to multiple murders and an unusual treasure hunt, and *A Vicious Circle* (1934), published the same year as *Desire to Kill* and succinctly summed up by one critic as 'murder committed in a roomful of thirteen guests at the height of a wild dope orgy'. As well as novels and short fiction, she wrote poetry and a psychological drama, *Two Share a Dwelling* (1935), which achieved moderate success on the London stage.

Until recently, Campbell had been largely forgotten. However, in 2022 the British small imprint Dean Street Press began reprinting her detective mysteries. The books include introductory text by Curtis Evans, author of *Masters of the 'Humdrum' Mystery* (2012) and *The Spectrum of English Murder* (2015), who has done much to champion many of the less well-remembered writers of the Golden Age. There is no authoritative source on the date of Alice Campbell's death.

'No Evidence' was first published in *Hush Magazine* on 1 June 1930, and I am grateful to David Brawn for locating a copy.

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POST HASTY

Andrew Garve

One bitter Sunday morning in March, an unusual problem was put before Inspector Knowles of the South Sussex C.I.D. It seemed that a man named Simpson who lived in a deeply rural part of the county had telephoned the police to say that a public post box near his home had been stolen.

Investigation by the local constable had confirmed the report. The hoops of iron which had clamped the small red box to a telegraph pole had been sawn through with a hacksaw. The box, which had been cleared at 8.30 on the Saturday morning, had obviously been stolen on the Saturday night.

The site was a T-junction of minor lanes, called May's End, and the nearest house—Simpson's—was a hundred yards away, behind trees. Neither Simpson, nor—it soon appeared—anyone else in the neighbourhood, had noticed anything unusual during the night.

Inspector Knowles didn't seem unduly worried by the lack of clues.

'We'll assume,' Knowles said, 'that the box was taken for a good, practical reason—for something inside it …'

'Well, now, I can't see anyone stealing a post box simply on the off-chance of finding money in it,' interrupted his dutiful sergeant.

'So we'll say, Knowles continued, 'that the fellow wanted a particular letter—which he could get only by taking the box away and breaking open … either someone else's letter or one he had posted himself, Davey.'

'Changed his mind about it, you mean, sir?'

'That's right, sergeant. It isn't hard to think of reasons. For example, he might have posted a letter earlier in the day confessing to something or accusing someone of something and then he might have had unexpected news—of a death, say. In the papers, or on the radio, or by telephone. Something that altered the whole situation. There are endless possibilities—we're certainly not short of a reasonable motive …'

‘We’re short of a line on the fellow who did it,’ Davey said. ‘Seems to me it could have been anyone. Some passing motorist who went back afterwards.’

Knowles considered. ‘It’s possible—but not very likely. Those lanes are used almost exclusively by the locals—they aren’t through routes. This must have been a very important letter … and if you go out with an important letter, you don’t drift about with it—you post it. I’d say it was definitely a local man.’

‘That still leaves the field pretty wide open, sir.’

‘Well, does it? Remember, sergeant, that raw wind yesterday. It was the sort of weather that makes sensible people want to hibernate. So the chances are that anyone who posted a letter in the May’s End box was posting it in the *nearest* box, and getting back to the warmth as soon as possible. And it shouldn’t be hard to find out which houses that box was the nearest to.’

Knowles unfolded a six-inch ordnance map of the area, on which all buildings were marked.

‘There we are,’ he said at last. ‘There are actually only twenty houses that are nearer the May’s End box than any other. Come on, sergeant, let’s go and see if we can narrow the field a bit more.’

As Knowles had expected, most of the occupants were quickly eliminated.

In the end, the inspector was left with only four ‘possibles’. The first was a retired but vigorous-looking colonel living with his wife. They said they hadn’t heard about the theft, which they thought outrageous. They hadn’t posted any letters in the May’s End box themselves—indeed, they had stayed indoors all the weekend.

The second ‘possible’ was a young man named Forbes, who worked as a draughtsman in the neighbouring town of Lambridge. He and his fiancée, who were soon to be married, had recently bought a modest cottage about two hundred yards from May’s End, and he was taking time off to do some decorating while his girl visited friends in Cheshire. Like the colonel, he said that the theft of the box was news to him. Asked if he had posted any letters during the weekend, he said he had sent one off to his fiancée that morning, but none on the Saturday.

The third ‘possible’ was a middle-aged solicitor, a bachelor, who lived in London and came to the country only for an occasional weekend. He had

been at the house alone, he said, since Friday night, working. He had heard from his neighbour, Simpson, about the theft. He had posted three letters in the box on Saturday, one containing an important document. It was a disgraceful business and he hoped the police would soon apprehend the culprit.

Finally there was a small-scale farmer named Angel, who seemed to resent the inspector's questions. He hadn't heard about the theft, he said, and he didn't know anything about it. He hadn't posted any letters over the weekend, and he hadn't been out on the Saturday night.

Knowles returned to his office in a pensive mood. He had a nagging feeling that someone had told him a lie—but he couldn't put his finger on it.

There were no developments for three days. Then there was an unexpected one. The solicitor rang Knowles from London to say that all three of the letters he had posted had been delivered.

Subsequent inquiries by the inspector revealed that of nine letters admittedly posted during the weekend by the occupants of the twenty houses, all had now reached their destinations. None had been tampered with. They had been posted in Lambridge late on Tuesday afternoon.

Knowles checked again with his four 'suspects'. The colonel said he had been in Lambridge on Tuesday afternoon to get his hair cut. Forbes said he had gone in after lunch to buy some more paint. The solicitor said he had spent all Tuesday seeing a client in the next county. The farmer said he hadn't been in Lambridge at all.

'Well,' Knowles commented, 'we know now that the thief didn't take the box for any letters but his own. Also, that he has a bit of a conscience—he could easily have destroyed them all. Posting them added to his danger …' The inspector continued to mull over the case, without making any progress.

It was not until Thursday morning, when he was working on something else, that he suddenly exclaimed, 'Sergeant, I'm a clot … *Of course!* Come on, we're going visiting.'

Forbes was still at his cottage, whistling cheerfully as he painted a door. His whistling stopped abruptly when the policemen appeared.

'Mr Forbes,' Knowles said, 'if I remember rightly, you told me you hadn't heard about the theft of that post box until my call here on Sunday afternoon.'

‘That’s right, inspector.’

‘You also told me you posted a letter to your fiancée on Sunday morning.’

‘Yes.’

‘Where did you post it?’

Forbes stared. ‘I—I posted in the box on the main road.’

‘Why not in the box at May’s End? It’s only two hundred yards from here. The main road is nearly a mile.’

‘Well, I—I don’t really know …’

‘I suggest,’ Knowles said, ‘that, you went to the main road because you knew the May’s End box wasn’t there. Because you had already removed it. Mind if I have a look round?’

‘Go ahead,’ the young man said tonelessly. With a gloomy face, he accompanied the policemen.

There was nothing in the house to justify suspicion, nothing in the sheds. Knowles went into the back garden. The ground was iron-hard—nothing could have been buried. Then his glance fell on a small pond. Near the centre there was a disturbed patch where the ice had been broken. Knowles looked significantly at the sergeant.

At that point, Forbes gave up. ‘Okay, inspector,’ he said. ‘The box is there …’

‘I was supposed to be getting married at the end of this month,’ Forbes said, when they were back in the house. ‘My fiancée, Barbara, and I—well, we hadn’t had what you’d call a smooth courtship, but at last everything seemed to be going fine. I was very happy. You see, I’m—I’m very much in love with her …

‘Then, last Friday, a quarrel suddenly blew up again. It was stupid, but we both got very angry. I came down here alone, still in a boiling rage, and instead of giving myself time to cool off I wrote her a furious letter, a real stinker, and posted it. I had no sooner shoved it in the box than I regretted it.

‘As the day wore on, I got more and more desperate thinking about it. I’d have sent her a wire asking her not to open the letter, but I wasn’t sure she’d get it in time.

‘So I thought, what the hell, my whole future’s at stake in this—and that night I went to May’s End and pinched the box. I had an awful job breaking

it open, but I managed it, and I destroyed the letter.

'On Sunday morning I wrote to Barbara, saying I was sorry and making things up—and on Tuesday I posted the other letters. I hoped that would be the end of it …'

Knowles picked up a photograph from the table. 'Is this your fiancée?'

Forbes nodded.

The inspector studied it for a moment. 'Charming,' he said—and paused. 'Well, Mr Forbes, I'm afraid you'll have to come along with me. Stealing Post Office property is a serious offence—though, strictly between ourselves, I wouldn't be surprised if the court decided to take a lenient view in the circumstances …'

The inspector was right. At the hearing, Forbes was given a heavy fine, a stern warning—and the magistrate's good wishes for a law-abiding future. Afterwards he went off with his fiancée to continue the decoration of their home.

'Well,' Sergeant Davey commented, 'he certainly was lucky. Could have ruined himself … Imagine, stealing a post box! All that trouble, just for a woman!'

Knowles smiled. 'I wouldn't say it was all that much trouble,' he said. 'Not as these things go. Did you never hear of the face that launched a thousand ships?'

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ANDREW GARVE

‘Andrew Garve’ was the best known pseudonym of Paul Winterton, a journalist and author born in Leicester on 12 February 1908. His parents, Ethel and Ernest, campaigned extensively in support of the temperance movement, and Ernest went on to become a member of Parliament. Their son attended Purley County School in Surrey, and after taking the Intermediate Arts Examination at school was awarded a further scholarship to the London School of Economics where he gained an honours degree in Economics in 1928.

Winterton won the first Acland Travelling Scholarship and spent nine months in the Soviet Union investigating the country’s economy, which he wrote about in *A Student in Russia* (1931) and elsewhere. Following in his father’s footsteps, Winterton stood in the 1931 General Election as a candidate for the Labour Party, but he lost to the sitting Conservative member. He also stood—and lost again—in 1935, by which time he was working as a journalist, first for *The Economist* and later the *News Chronicle*, for which he acted as its Moscow correspondent during the Second World War. He also reported for the BBC and was one of the first journalists to expose the Nazis’ atrocities after he was taken by the Russian Army to the Madjanek death camp outside Lublin.

While he continued to work as a journalist during the 1930s and early 1940s, Winterton began writing fiction. His first novel was *Death Beneath Jerusalem* (1938), written as by ‘Roger Bax’; a politically astute thriller with romantic notes, the book features a journalist called Philip Garve. Five more ‘Bax’ books followed, including two that drew on his Russian experiences—*Red Escapade* (1940) and *Came the Dawn* (1949), filmed as *Never Let Me Go* (1953) with the Cornish village of Mevagissey masquerading as the then Soviet port of Tallinn—as well as crime novels on more traditional lines, the best of which is *Blueprint for Murder* (1948), in

which an escapee from a German prisoner of war camp plots to murder his uncle.

By the end of the 1940s, Winterton had decided to abandon journalism and to adopt a new pseudonym. As ‘Andrew Garve’ he went on to write around 30 novels, beginning with the excellent *No Tears for Hilda* (1950), a detective story. As with the work of ‘Roger Bax’, some of the ‘Andrew Garve’ books are inspired by Soviet politics, most obviously *Murder in Moscow* (1951), in which a journalist investigates the death of a British communist, and Russia also provides the setting for the curiosity ‘Trial by Orgy’ (1957). However, Winterton’s ‘Garve’ novels vary widely in tone and settings, and they cover almost every facet of crime and suspense fiction. For example, *A Hole in the Ground* (1952) deals with death during a potholing expedition, while *Death and the Sky Above* (1953) is a Buchanesque whodunit; and *The Megstone Plot* (1956)—filmed as *A Touch of Larceny* (1960)—turns the idea of an espionage thriller on its head, and *The Golden Deed* (1960) is a ‘home invasion’ novel with a difference. Surprisingly, as Winterton himself was happily married and had four children with his wife Audrey, several of his crime novels feature domestic murder.

By the early 1950s, Winterton also played a role in championing crime fiction, helping to found the Crime Writers’ Association where he served, with Elizabeth Ferrars, as its first joint secretary. Later in the decade, he took on a third identity: while continuing to write as ‘Andrew Garve’, Winterton also became ‘Paul Somers’, author of five reasonably well-regarded thrillers. He died in a Surrey nursing home on 8 January 2001.

One of a handful of short stories by Paul Winterton, ‘Post Hasty’ was first published in the *London Evening News and Star* on 23 February 1962.

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GREEDY NIGHT

E. C. Bentley

‘Yow ow ow,’ observed Lord Peter Wimsey opening his eyes; then, reclosing and feebly knuckling them, ‘Ow wow. Yah ah ow.’

‘Very good, my lord,’ his servant said, as he drew the curtains of the bedroom. ‘It is now twelve o’clock noon, my lord. At what hour would your lordship take breakfast?’

‘Zero hour,’ Lord Peter snarled. ‘Take the nasty breakfast away, I don’t want any breakfast today. Oh Lord! Bunter, why did I drink all that Corton Clos du Roi 1904 on the top of a quart of archdeacon ale last night? I’m old enough to know better. Anyhow, my inside is.’

‘If I may make the suggestion, my lord, it may have been what your lordship had after coming home that is at the root of the trouble.’

Wimsey sat up in bed wild-eyed. ‘Bunter!’ he gasped. ‘Don’t tell me I had whisky as well.’

‘No, my lord. That may possibly have been your lordship’s intention; but I fear that what your lordship actually drank, in a moment of absentmindedness, was a mixture of furniture-polish and Vichy water. I found the empty bottles on the floor this morning, my lord.’

Wimsey sank back with a moan; then rallied himself and swallowed a little tea from the cup which Bunter had filled.

‘I don’t like this tea,’ he said peevishly. ‘I don’t believe this is my specially grown Son-of-Heaven china.’

‘It is, my lord; but in some circumstances the flavour of almost anything is apt to be sensibly impaired. May I urge, my lord, that an effort should be made to eat some breakfast? It is considered to be advisable on the morning after an occasion of festivity, even if the handle of a knife has to be employed to assist the process of deglutition.’

‘Oh, all right.’ Wimsey held out his hand for the menu which Bunter produced, like a conjurer, apparently from the air. ‘Well, I won’t eat *avoine secoueur*, anyhow. Give it to the cat.’

‘The cat has already tried it, my lord, during my momentary absence from the kitchen. The intelligent animal appears to be of your lordship’s opinion. I would recommend a little *pâté gonfleur sur canapé*, my lord, for the present emergency.’

Wimsey groaned. ‘I don’t believe I could taste even that,’ he said. ‘Very well, I’ll have a stab at it.’

‘Thank you, my lord.’ Bunter laid an armful of newspapers on the bed and withdrew. When he returned with the breakfast tray Wimsey was reading with absorbed interest. ‘Bunter,’ he said eagerly, ‘I see that at Sotheby’s on Monday they’re auctioning a thing I simply must have—the original manuscript of the Chanson de Roland, with marginal notes by Saint Louis. If I find I can’t go myself, I shall want you to pop round and bid for me. That is, of course, if it’s the genuine article. You could make sure of that, I suppose?’

‘Without difficulty, my lord. I have always taken an interest in the technical study of mediaeval calligraphy. I should be sceptical, though, about those marginal notes, my lord. It has always been understood, your lordship will recollect, that His Most Christian Majesty was unable to write. However—’

At this point there came a long-continued ringing at the doorbell of the flat; and after a brief interval Bunter, with all the appearance of acting under protest, showed the Bishop of Glastonbury into the bedroom.

‘I say, Peter, there’s the devil to pay!’ exclaimed that prelate. ‘Topsy’s pretty well off her onion, and Bill Mixer’s in a frightful dither. Have you heard what’s happened? But, of course, you couldn’t. They’ve been trying to get you on the ’phone this morning, but that man of yours kept on saying that he feared his lordship was somewhat closely engaged at the moment. So they rang me up and asked me to tell you.’

‘Well, why not tell me?’ Wimsey snapped. Topsy, the Bishop’s favourite sister, was an old friend, and her husband was a man for whom Wimsey had a deep regard that dated from his years at Balliol.

‘Dermot’s dead.’

‘I say! What a ghastly thing!’ Wimsey scrambled out of bed and into a dressing-gown. ‘What happened to poor old Dermot?’

‘That’s just what they don’t know. There was absolutely nothing the matter with him, but he was found dead this morning—apparently uninjured, they say. Foul play is suspected, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Wimsey agreed, plying his hairbrushes vigorously.

‘And Topsy and Bill would like you, if you can, to go down for the weekend—’

‘Up,’ Wimsey murmured.

‘All right, up for the weekend,’ said the Bishop a little testily. ‘And see what you can do to clear the mystery up, or down, or any dashed way you like.’

Wimsey rang the bell, and Bunter instantly appeared. ‘Oh, look here, Bunter, will you get the German Ambassador on the ’phone for me?’ As Bunter busied himself with the instrument by the bedside, Wimsey turned to the Bishop again. ‘Well, Mike, I will certainly go if they want me. I shall drive there in the Fendlair, so it won’t take long.’

The Bishop repressed a shudder. ‘Why do you amateur detectives always drive like bloody lunatics?’ he asked plaintively. ‘You all do—except Trent, of course; he never does anything off-colour. Well, they’ll be glad of your help—if you get there in one piece, that is—and I’m grateful to you myself. I must push off now—got to move the second reading of the Disestablishment Bill in the Lords this afternoon, and I haven’t prepared a line of my stuff yet.’

As the Bishop disappeared, Bunter presented the telephone receiver to Wimsey on a salver. ‘His Excellency is now at the apparatus, my lord.’

‘Hullo, is that Bodo?’ Wimsey cried. ‘Yes, Peter speaking. Heil Hitler. I say, old man, I’m frightfully sorry, but I can’t turn up at your squash this evening. I’ve just heard some very sad news … No, Heil Hitler, it’s nobody you know … Yes, Heil Hitler, very serious. I mean, dead, and all that. I’ve got to go and see about it … That’s kind of you, Bodo. You know I value your sympathy. Thanks hunderttausendmal. Well, Heil Hitler, good-bye.’

During the progress of his toilet, Wimsey cancelled by telephone, with all apologies due, several other appointments. A Sunday luncheon of the Food and Wine Society at Tewkesbury, to test the quality—so praised by Falstaff—of the local mustard. A meeting of the Committee of the Anerithmon Gelasma Yacht Club, called for the purpose of blackballing the Duke of Cheshire. A supper for Miss Ruth Draper, who would give, it was hoped, her impersonation of the Nine Muses discussing the character of Aphrodite.

Wimsey then got into communication with the Spoopendyke Professor of Egyptology in the University of Oxford, and accepted in brief but sympathetic terms his invitation to spend the weekend. Professor Mixer was greatly relieved, he said. He feared that Wimsey must have sacrificed other engagements in order to do Topsy and himself this kindness.

Wimsey burdened his soul with the statement that he had been going to spend the next few days in bringing the catalogue of his library up to date; a thing which could be done at any time.

The Professor of Egyptology met Wimsey at the door of his grey old house of Headington stone, nearly facing the main gateway of Janus. He greeted his visitor with subdued cordiality, his left hand clutching his unkempt beard as he talked.

'It's very good of you to come, Peter,' he said. 'Topsy was anxious to have your opinion, and we are very glad to have you with us anyhow. But whatever you may find out about the cause of death, you can't bring back poor Dermot. I thought it better you should stay in college, if you don't mind. This is a house of sorrow, you see; and you would really be more comfortable in Janus. I've got you rooms in the Fellows' Quad—Simpson's—he is in the Morea just now. You only want to be careful not to disturb the manuscript of his forthcoming book on the pre-Minoan cultures of the Dodecanese. He has a habit of doing all his writing on the backs of old envelopes and leaving them all over the floor. So perhaps you'd better not use the study—you might prefer not to in any case, because of course it can't ever be dusted on account of the envelopes—hasn't been for years.'

'I shall love staying in Janus,' said Wimsey. 'It's a college I was very seldom in when I was up, and the only experience I had of the Fellows' Quad was when Jinks was Proctor, and I had to go to his rooms there to see him about my chaining a gorilla to the railings of the Martyrs' Memorial.'

'Ha! H'm! Just so,' said the Professor. 'Perhaps you would like to see the body at once. It is still here, lying just as it was found—in the library.'

'Well, naturally,' Wimsey said with a touch of impatience. 'Where did you think I thought it was?—in the scullery? Yes, I should like to see it now.'

The Professor led the way to the library, a large, light room on the ground floor, walled with crowded shelves, and smelling slightly of mummied cats. Before the central window was a large writing-table covered with piles of

papers in orderly array. On the blotter, Wimsey noted with interest, a very modern book lay open with a part of one of its leaves torn away—a detective story which had murdered sleep for countless readers.

The body lay on the carpet beside the table. Wimsey, mastering the emotion that seized him, knelt down and looked closely at the stocky, well-knit figure, still carefully neat in appearance as Dermot always was in life, and in a natural posture, but that the feet were somewhat drawn up. Those keen eyes were closed now, the mouth too was shut, and there was not a trace of expression on the small, aquiline features. No blood was to be seen, and there was, as Wimsey soon ascertained, no sign of any wound on the body.

Dermot had been in perfect health and excellent spirits up to the time of his death, Professor Mixer said. He himself had been the last to see him alive—at about half-past nine o'clock that morning, when they had exchanged a few words in this same room before the Professor went out to Blackwell's in quest of a book. Shortly after that his wife, passing the door of the library, had heard Dermot swearing violently within, but she had thought nothing of that.

'You remember, Peter,' the Professor said, 'how rough his language often was. He picked up the habit during his time in the mercantile marine, and he seemed quite unable to break himself of it. Topsy, you know, rather admired it really, and I never paid any attention to it; but it cost us the services of an excellent cook, a strict Wesleyan, and sometimes I felt rather uncomfortable about it when I was seeing pupils here.'

'Do you think he could have taught them anything?' Wimsey asked.

'I fear so—yes. I mean, I hope so,' said the Professor with a melancholy shake of the head. 'Only last week Lord Torquilstone brought me an essay, and as soon as he entered the room Dermot called out—well, I cannot bring myself to repeat what he said. It was as essentially meaningless as it was deplorably coarse, and Torquilstone was quite taken aback. Then there was another time, when the Vice-Chancellor came to tea with us. We were in the drawing-room upstairs, but I am afraid that he distinctly heard Dermot, who was in this room, blaspheming in the most dreadful terms. In fact, Hoggarty must have heard, because he dropped a piece of muffin into his tea, and then remarked upon the lovely weather that we were having—which was not the case, for it was pouring with rain and very cold for the time of the year. I fear I shall be getting quite a bad name in the Hebdomadal Council.'

‘And was that—I mean what Topsy heard—the last evidence of his being alive?’

‘Yes. It is painful the Professor said, ‘to think that those were in all probability his last words; for I came in about half an hour later, and found him as you see.’

Dinner with Professor Mixer and his wife that evening was not a cheerful affair. Topsy, pale and red-eyed, strangled a sob from time to time, and made hardly a pretence of eating. Her husband, too, could do no more than peck feebly at a half-raw cutlet, while his talk (about the funerary customs which grew up under the Hyksos dynasty) had little of its customary sparkle.

Wimsey, on the other hand, urged on by some impulse which he could neither understand nor control, ate enough of the repulsive meal for all three, while yet he shuddered to think of the probable consequences. He sketched in fancy a lyrical dialogue between himself and his digestion:

> ‘*Know’st thou not me?’ the deep voice cried.*
> *So long enjoyed, so oft misused;*
> *Alternate, in thy fickle pride,*
> *Extolled, neglected and accused …’*

At length he took himself away, and retired to his sitting-room in college to think over all that he had learned from the Professor before dinner-time, and from his interrogation of Topsy and the servants. The case baffled him.

He sat at his window on the first floor, looking out, in the gathering gloom, upon the velvet lawn and the stately background of fifteenth-century architecture, pierced just opposite his place of observation by a broad, low-pointed archway through which a section of the Front Quad could be faintly discerned. The Aquinas Club, he had been told, were holding their annual dinner that night, by invitation of the Fellows, in the Senior Common Room, and for some time past their proceedings, which were fully choral, had claimed his attention. He heard the tremendous burden of ‘On Ilkla Moor Baht ‘at’, the stirring swing of ‘Auprès de la Blonde’, the complex cadences of ‘Green Grow the Rushes Oh!’, the noble organ-music of ‘Slattery’s Mounted Foot’, the crashing staccato of ‘Still His Whiskers Grew’, the solemn keening of ‘The Typist’s Farewell’. Once there were

indications that a Rhodes Scholar was trying, with as little success as usually waits on his countrymen's efforts in that direction, to remember the words of his own national anthem.

Then there fell a hush; and it was not until half an hour later that Wimsey's wrestling with his problem was disturbed by new sounds of academic liveliness in the Front Quad. He gazed expectantly towards the great archway, and presently a slight pyjamaed figure fled across the darksome frame of vision, pursued by a loose group of obscurer shapes, dimly seen to be white-shirted, and quite plainly heard to yell. Wimsey sighed. The luxurious self-conscious melancholy of those no longer ridiculously young, but having—with any luck—half a lifetime still before them, possessed him. Elbows on sill, chin in hands, he gazed into the now untenanted gloom, recalling lost binges of old years.

A little later the moon peered out from her curtains of cloud, and Wimsey, finding that his mood demanded some further recapturing of the spirit of a college by night, descended into the Quad and set out on a voyage of discovery. In the wall to his left hand an opening that looked like the doorway to a staircase of rooms, such as he had just quitted, turned out to be the archway of a vaulted passage leading into a tiny square of stone, whose small grated windows and peaked turret recalled one of Doré's visions of the Paris of Rabelais. From this another entry led to another Quad, of normal size, and thence again he passed to one yet larger, which he could recognise by the battlements on the further wall, the outer wall of Janus, as Patey's Quad.

As Wimsey stood at gaze, imagining what study, what talk, or possibly what *chemin-de-fer*, might be in progress behind the few windows that still showed lights within, a young man emerged from one of the staircase entries. He was white-shirted, his hair was somewhat disordered, and he carried under one arm an enormous book. This he took to the centre of the gravelled space, then placed it carefully on the ground, and sat upon it. Soon his wandering eye caught sight of Wimsey in the moonlight, and the two inspected one another in silence for some moments. Then the keen instinct of youth told the sitter that the figure before him, slender though it was, must be that of someone of thirty at least, and with instant deference to age and infirmity he rose and waved a hand towards the obese volume on the gravel.

‘Won’t you sit down, sir?’ he said. ‘Not enough room for two, I’m afraid, even on Liddell and Scott.’

‘Thanks, I’d rather not,’ Wimsey said. ‘I’m staying in your Fellows’ Quad, and I just came out for a stroll before turning in. You have been at the Aquinas dinner, perhaps?’

‘Yes,’ said the young man. ‘It was rather progressive, as a dinner—sort of thing makes you feel a trifle listless afterwards—so, if you’re sure you won’t—’ He subsided upon his Lexicon, then went on: ‘Young Warlock got it up his nose rather, you see, and went to sleep on the sofa, so we carried him to his rooms and put him to bed. Then the little devil woke up suddenly and got loose, and we had to chase him all over the college before we could get him bedded down again. Now I’m just sitting here for rest and meditation. D’you ever meditate?’

‘Oh, often,’ said Wimsey. ‘What were you thinking of meditating upon this time?’

‘Housman’s edition of Manilius,’ the young man answered, abstractedly removing his collar and tie. ‘Wonderful chap—Housman, I mean; Manilius was rather a blister. The way Housman pastes the other commentators in the slats does your heart good. I was just concentrating on the way he kicks the stuffing out of Elias Stöber—lovely!’

‘Well, I won’t interrupt you,’ Wimsey said. ‘I’m thinking something over myself, as a matter of fact.’

‘All right, go to it,’ the young man said amiably; then, lifting up his voice in an agreeable baritone, ‘I never envy a-a-anyone when I’m thinking … thinking … thinking … I say,’ he added ‘who are you? I’m Mitchell, named Bryan Farrant by my innocent parents; so of course I’m never called anything but B.F.’

‘Hard luck! My name’s Wimsey.’

‘Not Lord Peter?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sinful Solomon!’ exclaimed the young man. ‘Here, you simply must confer distinction on my Lexicon. I’ll have the cover you sat on framed.

‘No, really,’ Wimsey laughed, ‘I must go. But do you and your friends really read the chronicles of my misspent life, then?’

‘Do we read them?’ cried Mr Mitchell. ‘I should say we do read them! We eat them!’

‘How jolly for you—I mean for me—that is to say, for her—oh well, you know what I mean,’ Wimsey said distractedly.

‘I suppose I do, if you say so,’ said Mr Mitchell without conviction. ‘You know the lyric there is about you?

> ‘*Lord Peter Wimsey*
> *May look a little flimsy,*
> *But he’s simply sublime*
> *When nosing out a crime*.’

‘No, I hadn’t heard it,’ Wimsey said. ‘It’s nice to be sublime, anyhow. Well, here I go. Good night.’

‘Sweet dreams!’ said Mr Mitchell.

On the Sunday morning Wimsey awoke with that indescribable feeling that something has happened, but one does not know quite what. Mr Mitchell’s parting wish had been not too exactly fulfilled. Wimsey had dreamed of having his head bitten off by a crocodile, after which he had attended a Yorkshire farmers’ market-day ordinary, and then, in the character of a missionary, had been chased by a cassowary over the plains of Timbuctoo.

He arose unrefreshed. From his bedroom window he perceived a College servant approaching the entrance to his staircase. The hour being no later than seven o’clock, the scout, who was in his shirt-sleeves, had a broom over his left shoulder, a teapot in his right hand, an old cap on back to front, and a cigarette behind one of his ears. He was eating.

‘What would Bunter say? Perish Bunter!’ mused Wimsey ungratefully. ‘I am in the arms of Alma Mater once more, and this—this is one of the conditions of her kindness. I wonder what that scout is eating. I never saw Bunter eat. Perhaps he never does—it’s a low habit, eating.’

Eating! The term recurred again and again to Wimsey’s mind as he prepared himself for the facing of another day. What was it that was trying to force itself into the realm of consciousness?

An hour later, the scout, looking now much less like a hangman’s assistant, set out for him that Oxford breakfast whose origin is not to be descried through the mist of ages—coffee, scrambled eggs and bacon, toast, butter, marmalade. ‘And a jolly good breakfast too!’ Wimsey reflected. ‘What was good enough for Duns Scotus and St Edmund, Roger Bacon and

More, Erasmus and Bodley, is good enough for me. And in this holy city I seem always to be hungry. How I always eat at Oxford!'

There again! Back came his mind to eating, though all the year round he would breakfast without a moment's thought for the alimentary process.

Suddenly Wimsey thrust back his chair from the table. 'My dream!' he cried hoarsely, striking his forehead with his hand, which at the moment was holding a spoon filled with marmalade. 'Eating! That was the concept which the Unknown I was pushing at the Conscious Me! What did young B.F. say? They eat them!'

Wimsey dashed impetuously from the room.

Scene: The library at the Spoopendyke Professor's house. Present: Topsy, her husband, Lord Peter Wimsey and the corpse. Armed with a letter-opener taken from the writing-table, Wimsey knelt beside all that was mortal of Dermot, and gently prised apart the firm-set jaws. From the open mouth he drew forth a piece of printed paper and smoothed it out upon the table-top beside the novel that still lay there, open at a page of which a part had been torn away. In silence he fitted the scrap into its place in the mutilated page, then pointed to the title at its head.

'*Strong Poison!*' he said in a low voice. 'Too strong indeed for poor Dermot. Such is the magic of that incisive, compelling style that even the very printed word is saturated with the essence of what it imparts. Others eat her works in a figurative sense only; Dermot began to eat this one in truth and in fact, and so rushed, all unknowing, on his doom.'

Topsy burst into tears. 'Uh! Uh! Uh!' she said. 'Why did you leave the bub-bub-book about, Bill? You knew he never could, uh! uh! resist an open book.'

'But how was I to know the story was such a powerful one?' the Professor groaned. 'I am no judge of any literature later than 1300 B.C.'

Wimsey stood with bowed head. 'You have one small consolation,' he said, laying a hand on Topsy's shoulder. 'Death must have been instantaneous. Dear old Dermot!' he mused. 'He was a priceless old bird.'

'Well, not exactly priceless,' the Professor said with academic care for the niceties of expression. 'Topsy bought him in Caledonian Market for three pounds, including the cage.'

'You ought to have put him bub-bub-back in it when you went out,' Topsy sobbed.

‘I know. I shall never forgive myself,’ said the Professor dismally. ‘I did think of it, in fact, but when I suggested it Dermot cursed me so frightfully that I left him at liberty.’

‘He was chu-chu-cheap at the money,’ Topsy howled. ‘When once I had heard him sus-sus-swear I would have gone to a fuf-fuf-fiver. I had never heard anything lul-lul-like it.’

‘No! Hadn’t you though?’ Wimsey was interested. ‘And you were at Somerville, too.’

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E. C. BENTLEY

Edmund Clerihew Bentley was born in West London on 10 July 1875, the son of John Bentley, a civil servant, and his Scottish wife Margaret, whose maiden name was Clerihew. Edmund attended St Paul's School and was elected to a Modern History Exhibition at Merton College, Oxford. He enjoyed university life and, as well as writing for university magazines like *Isis* and *The J.C.R.*, he was a keen oarsman. He was also an effective debater and, in November 1897, was elected president of the Oxford Union Society. In 1936, he and Dorothy L. Sayers would lose an O.U. debate on the motion 'That the present excessive indulgence in the solution of fictitious crime augurs ill for our national future', in which Sayers noted that Oxford dons were clearly devotees of crime fiction given how many wrote to tell her about the mistakes in her books.

After coming down in 1898, Bentley began studying to become a barrister. He was called to the bar in 1901 and, on 14 June the following year, he married Violet Boileau, with whom he would have three children. Never wholly comfortable with what he described as 'the shifts and compromises of the law', he decided to become a journalist. He joined the *London Daily News* where, working alongside his schoolfriend G. K. Chesterton, he wrote political and social commentaries under his own name and, as 'Edmund Clerihew', comic vignettes with titles like 'Things Seen by a Dentist', 'The Truth about Toys' and 'The Importance of the Zoo'. As himself, he also wrote comic verse for *Punch*, and under his pen-name short stories for *The Bystander*. With *Biography for Beginners* (1905), a volume illustrated by Chesterton, Bentley immortalised the 'clerihew', a form of poem to which he would return to in *More Biography* (1929) and *Baseless Biography* (1939). His definition of a clerihew was:

> A short four-line verse of which the first and second lines are expected to rhyme, more or less, and also the third and fourth. The hero, so to speak, should be a well-known person, alive or dead, whose name should terminate the first line. A certain rhythmic quality should be observed.

The form was easily copied and in 1949, Bentley judged a competition run by the *Sunday Times* to write a clerihew about two famous people, picking from a list of six. This attracted 6,000 entries, among which Bentley particularly enjoyed the following 'ghoulish' but ineligible entry:

> *'Incidentally,*
> *Mr Bentley,*
> *Have you a clerihew*
> *For the stone when they berihew?'*

By 1908, Bentley had risen to assistant editor of the *Daily News* and, with his journalistic career and family life progressing nicely, he decided to try to write a detective story. He began *Trent's Last Case* (1913) by writing the final chapter and, with its sensational twist ending, the hitherto moderately amusing journalist became one of the most respected names in crime fiction, surpassed only by Conan Doyle and perhaps Chesterton, to whom he dedicated the book in reciprocation for G.K.'s dedication to him of *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). More than a century after its publication, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of *Trent's Last Case* in sustaining and fuelling the popularity of crime fiction into the so-called Golden Age. However, it is important to recognise that Bentley planned the novel as a satire first and as a detective story second. In the same vein, despite the book's success, he would always consider himself a journalist rather than a writer. In 1912, to further his career, he moved from the left-leaning London newspaper the *Daily News* to the right-leaning national newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, where he remained, on and off, for twenty-two years, writing political commentaries and reviewing books, mainly crime fiction.

Despite pressure to write more mysteries of his own, Bentley was well aware of his limitations. He did revive Philip Trent for a series of short stories, *Trent Intervenes* (1938—reprinted in 2017 with the inclusion of the

previously uncollected Trent story ‘The Ministering Angel’), and in 1943 he wrote ‘The Body in the Heather’, a brief non-series puzzle-play for BBC radio. Bentley’s only other novel, *Elephant’s Work* (1950), is a thriller, while the second detective novel to feature Trent, *Trent’s Own Case* (1936), was written with his friend and fellow journalist Herbert Warner Allen, whom Bentley had hired at the *Daily News* back in 1908. Warner Allen had already written several crime novels including *Mr Clerihew, Wine Merchant* (1933), and in *Trent’s Own Case*, Bentley’s Trent works with Warner Allen’s detective, the eponymous wine merchant and president of the Junior Clerihew Club of oenophiles.

In 1947, Edmund Clerihew Bentley retired from journalism and his final short story, an uncharacteristic piece of science fiction called ‘Flying Visit’, appeared in 1953. He died after a short illness at his home, 10 Porchester Terrace, Paddington, on 30 March 1956.

An affectionate parody of Dorothy L. Sayers’ most famous character, Lord Peter Wimsey, ‘Greedy Night’ first appeared in *Parody Party* (1936).

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THE BLACKMAILERS

Cyril Hare

‘An individual has called to see you, my lord,’ said the butler in a disapproving tone. ‘He gives the name of Thompson, and he says that he has an appointment.’ His voice made it quite clear that he did not believe either of these statements, and that if they were true he would like them even less than he did.

‘Quite correct, Bissett,’ replied his master; ‘ask him to come up.’

Bissett’s face grew a shade more disapproving than before. ‘Very good, my lord,’ he murmured resignedly as he moved towards the door. His worst fears were justified. With any master less eccentric he would have no hesitation in turning the Thompsons of this world from the door without a tremor. But with Lord Bernard you never could tell. Neither in his visitors nor in anything else did he conform to the standard which the higher butlerdom expects. ‘But there,’ as Bissett was wont to say in his more expansive moods, ‘you’ve got to make allowances when you’re in service with a Public Character!’

A Public Character Lord Bernard certainly was. Bissett recognised it, so did Mr Thompson; so, also, not least, Lord Bernard himself. None of the three could have said exactly why, but every journalist in England worth his salary knew that to Lord Bernard Ballington and his like every doing great or small was attached a high and permanent news value. In a word, he was ‘news’.

To be the younger brother of a marquess, still under forty, well-off and good-looking at that, is an enviable state and worth an occasional paragraph in any column of Social Jottings, but that was not enough to explain it. There are other marquesses in England, and even dukes for the matter of that, and quite a number of them have brothers, but in the eyes of every sub-editor in the kingdom they must yield pride of place to Lord Bernard.

Others might struggle for a place in the public eye; he simply was in it, unquestionably, as though by some inherent right.

Admittedly he was not the cleverest nor the most useful of his class, or even of his family. He left it to his elder brother, the Marquess of Middlesex, to devote the best years of his life to grinding toil in Parliament and to win the praises of the Cabinet as an Under Secretary, and to his younger brother, Lord Arthur, to gain the D.S.O. at Ypres and a bar to it at Cambrai. He had nothing to show for his celebrity. None the less, when he married one of the prettiest (and wealthiest) girls in England quite two-thirds of the vast crowd that blocked the approaches to St Margaret's had come to see the bridegroom rather than the bride. And if that is not celebrity I do not know what is.

Bissett, his face positively lowering with disapproval, conducted Mr Thompson into his master's comfortably furnished study. The visitor's appearance seemed to justify his gloom. He was a short, shabby, sallow-faced man, with a nose unpleasantly askew, eyes considerably too close together, and clothes that smelled faintly of whisky. He seemed. however, to be the one person in the world whom Lord Bernard was most anxious to see. To Bissett's disgust he was greeted like a long-lost friend.

'Come in, my dear fellow!' cried his lordship cheerfully, 'come in and take a seat. Will you have a cigarette?'

Mr Thompson seemed as much taken aback by his reception as the faithful Bissett himself. Declining the proffered cigarette, he seated himself uncomfortably on the extreme edge of a chair and waited until the door had closed behind the outraged butler before he spoke. Even then he seemed to have some difficulty in putting into words what he had to say.

'I have come to see you, my lord,' he began at last, 'about'—he glanced nervously at Lord Bernard, and then let his eyes wander uncertainly about the room—'about—' He paused again.

'Yes?' Lord Bernard helped him out affably. 'I have your letter here asking for an appointment. "Certain information," you say, don't you?'

'Information, yes.' The word seemed to give the visitor courage. 'That's just it. I 'ave—have—certain information, my lord, which is of a rather private nature concerning yourself, and which information—'

'Which you are prepared to sell me, I suppose?' asked Lord Bernard.

'Not exactly that, my lord,' was the reply. 'Not exactly that. The information which I 'ave is information which your lordship 'as already and

others ’aven’t, and I’ve come ’ere to find out just what it may be worth to your lordship not to let those others know it.’

Lord Bernard shrugged his shoulders. ‘Put it that way if you like,’ he said airily. ‘I was only trying to spare your feelings. Good heavens! Do you think I’ve never been blackmailed before?’

Mr Thompson was somewhat taken aback, but he stuck to his guns.

‘My information relates to a certain Miss Poppy Plantagenet,’ he went on, ‘now dancing at the Melodic Theatre, Piccadilly.’

Lord Bernard rose to his feet and went to an antique bureau which stood against the wall at the far end of the room.

‘Please go on, my dear fellow,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Don’t mind me; I’m listening.’

Somewhat disconcerted, Mr Thompson went on:

‘My information relates to the parentage of this young lady. It is to the effect that you are her father—’

‘And her mother a landlady’s daughter at Oxford, since deceased,’ rejoined Lord Bernard, returning from the bureau with a number of papers in his hand. ‘Quite correct. I suppose Mrs Gubbins has been talking, as usual? A dreadful nuisance to Poppy, having a grandmother like that. Never mind, she’ll drink herself to death before long.’ He sat down again at his desk and looked across at his visitor. ‘Well, Mr Thompson, you were saying —?’

‘I was saying,’ said Mr Thompson doggedly, ‘or rather, I was going to say, that this was information which you, as a newly married man, and as a well-known man, might be glad to keep from the world, and more particularly from ’er Ladyship. And that it might be worth to your lordship —shall we say a thousand pounds?’

His lordship shook his head. ‘We shall not,’ he replied firmly. ‘Five hundred is my regular tariff for blackmail. One must have rules, you know, or the thing gets beyond all bounds. Do you agree to five hundred?’

Somewhat to his own surprise Mr Thompson nodded.

‘Very good,’ said Lord Bernard. He produced a fountain pen and picked up a sheet of paper which he had taken from the bureau. ‘And understand this. I don’t allow blackmailers to become pensioners. Of course, I’m making no suggestion against you personally, Mr Thompson, but I have heard of cases where gentlemen with information to sell have come back for more. So if you don’t mind signing this—’

He pushed the sheet of paper on which he had been writing to the disconcerted Mr Thompson.

'I think I've got your name right, haven't I?' he asked; 'Albert Edward Thompson, and the address at Brixton Hill. I've put a twopenny stamp at the place where you sign.'

Mr Thompson found himself confronted by a typewritten document in which his name and other details had been filled in in ink. It ran as follows:

> 'Whereas I, Albert Edward Thompson, of' (here followed Mr Thompson's address) 'am in possession of certain information relating to' (here there was a blank in the typescript, and Lord Bernard had filled in 'the parentage of Miss Poppy Plantagenet') 'and tending to the prejudice of Lord Bernard Ballington, now therefore I, the said Albert Edward Thompson, in consideration of the sum of £500 (five hundred pounds), the receipt whereof I hereby acknowledge, and in consideration of the earnest request of the said Lord Bernard Ballington, hereby agree not to divulge the said information to Lady Bernard Ballington or any other member of the family of the said Lord Bernard Ballington.
>
> In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this ___ day of ____, 19__' (Lord Bernard had added the date.)

Mr Thompson regarded this document with disfavour.

'Neat, don't you think?' remarked Lord Bernard genially. 'I do like to have things done in a businesslike way. I'm not a lawyer, of course, so I daresay it's dreadful rubbish really. But I must say I think it reads rather well. Now,' he went on, producing a cheque book, 'I suppose an open cheque will suit you. It's what I usually do, you know. Payable to bearer.'

He wrote the cheque as he spoke, and then held out his hand for the typewritten undertaking. Mr Thompson meanwhile had said nothing. He sat silent, his lips moving slowly while he pored over the document. Finally he shrugged his shoulders in a resigned fashion and placed his sprawling signature across the stamp which had been thoughtfully provided for him.

'There you are!' he exclaimed. 'And much good may it do you! Now, where's the money?'

Lord Bernard took the paper, folded it carefully, and locked it away in his desk.

‘Money, my dear Mr Thompson?’ he said gently. ‘Money? But you’ve had it.’

‘What d’yer mean?’ asked the other fiercely.

‘You *have* had it; you’ve just said so. “The receipt whereof I hereby acknowledge”,’ quoted his lordship with relish. ‘A charming phrase, and one that would be accepted against you anywhere, I am afraid—in any court of law, at any rate.’

‘Court o’ law be damned!’ shouted Thompson. ‘If you don’t want that nice young wife of yours to know all about Miss Poppy inside of twenty-four hours you’d better hand over that cash.’

Lord Bernard smiled indulgently. ‘I am sorry to disappoint you, but I’m afraid there is nothing about Miss Plantagenet which would be news to my wife. I always think that on marriage a man should make a clean breast of things. Don’t you agree?’

Mr Thompson did not attempt to answer the question. Instead he said between his teeth: ‘I can make your dirty name notorious, anyway, you damned double-crosser!’

‘You seem to forget that it is tolerably notorious already,’ replied Lord Bernard easily. ‘I notice that I was described in a paper last week as one of the three best-known men in England, and upon my soul I believe it is true. No, I am sorry, but I can’t agree with you that anything you can do will affect the reputation I have in the eyes of the public. To them I am an aristocrat, and therefore immoral. In fact, they would be rather disappointed if I were not. As for my family and friends, well—’

Mr Thompson interrupted him eagerly. ‘Ah! your family and friends, my lord; that’s just it. You’ve got to keep it from them, ’aven’t you?’ he said. ‘I can make things pretty unpleasant for you in that direction, I fancy.’

Lord Bernard raised his eyebrows. ‘Do you?’ he asked gently. ‘I am sorry to disillusion you, but I am afraid you will find yourself mistaken there. I don’t want to be snobbish, my dear Thompson, but you must remember that the circles in which I live have not, perhaps, the same high standards as those to which you are more accustomed. I fear that Mayfair has regrettably lax views about affairs of this kind.’ He paused, and then added thoughtfully: ‘In more middle-class neighbourhoods the views of conduct are much stricter, I am told. In places like Brixton Hill, for example.’

Something in his tone made Mr Thompson look up.

‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded.

‘About Brixton Hill,’ replied his lordship, ‘and more particularly about a little newsagent’s shop there, which does quite a good trade, I am told, in a highly respectable neighbourhood Mrs Thompson runs it most efficiently, I am sure, but do you think the neighbours will deal with her so readily when they hear that her husband has changed his address to Brixton Gaol?’

Mr Thompson leapt to his feet with an oath. ‘What d’yer mean?’ he shouted.

Lord Bernard was imperturbability itself. ‘What I say,’ he replied. ‘You have been good enough to sign a paper which, combined with the letter you sent me—and my evidence, of course—will send you to a much less comfortable place than Brixton Hill for a very long time.’

‘You can’t fool me that way,’ sneered Thompson. ‘You’ll never dare to prosecute.’

‘Won’t I?’ was the answer. ‘On the contrary, it will be a new and entertaining experience to me. My knowledge of the law courts has so far been confined to two divorce cases and a libel action in which I gave evidence. This will be a pleasant change. Do you think I care for publicity? My good man, I live on it! You can no more harm me by threatening me with exposure than you can hurt a fish by pouring water on it. Oh! I shall enjoy it, I can assure you.’ He paused, and fixed Mr Thompson with his eye. ‘Whether you will enjoy it quite so much is another question, of course,’ he added.

Thoroughly discomfited by now, Mr Thompson made no answer for a time, finally blurting out, ‘What are you getting at, anyway?’

Lord Bernard had not removed his eyes from his victim’s face. His expression, from being airy and whimsical, had become set, and when he spoke there was a new quality of sternness in his voice also.

‘I am getting at you, Mr Albert Edward Thompson,’ he said. ‘At you and at your unsavoury goings on. At present you are only an amateur blackmailer, and a very inefficient one; but in time you may become better at the job, and therefore dangerous. I have taught you a little lesson today, and, like all lessons, it has got to be paid for. I suggest that for this one you pay—shall we say fifty pounds?’

‘Fifty pounds!’ Thompson screamed.

‘That was the figure I suggested.’

‘But I ’aven’t got fifty pounds!’ shouted the wretched man. ‘What are you talking about? I’m a poor man who ’as to earn ’is living. What do you

mean with your fifty pounds? Look here, my lord, let me go now, and I promise—'

'You had fifty pounds from young Charles Rimington yesterday,' said Lord Bernard coldly. 'And you are not leaving this room until you have given it to me. Unless, of course, you prefer to let the law take its course.'

'Of all the dirty tricks!' cried the other. 'Why, this is—'

'This is blackmail,' finished his lordship calmly. 'Of course it is. This is blackmail as it is practised by those who know the art. And kindly note that I am offering no receipt. Also that I do not promise that I will not return for more should I hear that you have any more from that source.'

Two minutes later Lord Bernard sat alone listening to the front door close behind his visitor. On his desk lay a bundle of Treasury notes. For a moment he sat musing, toying with them in the manner of a man trying to make up his mind. Then he smiled.

'After all,' he said aloud, 'why shouldn't young Rimington pay for his lesson as well?'

He touched the bell. Bissett entered, flushed and disapproving.

'Has Mr Thompson gone?' asked Lord Bernard.

'He *has*, my lord,' replied Bissett, with an emphasis that was a reproach in itself.

'Good! I don't think we are likely to be troubled with him again. Oh, and, Bissett! How is your wife?'

'Much better, my lord, thank you for inquiring. The doctor now pronounces her to be convalescent.'

'I'm delighted to hear it. Now I fancy that a holiday at the seaside is what she wants. Take her away for a fortnight, Bissett. It will do you both a world of good. This ought to be enough to see you through. Catch!'

The astonished Bissett found himself with fifty pounds in his hands. There were, as he remarked that evening to his wife, many consolations in being in service with a Public Character.

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CYRIL HARE

‘Cyril Hare’ was the pen-name of Alfred Alexander Gordon Clark. He was born on 4 September 1900 at his parents’ home, Mickleham Hall in Dorking. His wealthy father Henry was, among other squirearchical roles, High Sheriff of Surrey and a commander in the Surrey Imperial Yeomanry, and his mother Helen was the local ‘Primrose Dame’, in charge of rousing support for the Conservative Party, an undemanding task in that part of southern England. An ardent boy scout and choir boy, Gordon Clark attended St Aubyn’s School and later the prestigious Rugby School where, aside from his academic achievements, he was a fine cross-country runner, finishing in the top ten—just—in the annual Crick Run in 1919.

On leaving Rugby, he followed in his father’s footsteps and went up to Oxford University to read History. As an undergraduate in New College, he was a pupil of Dr William Spooner, an absent-minded don best known for his not always unintentional verbal gymnastics. Gordon Clark achieved first-class honours and decided to go into Law and become a barrister. He was called to the Bar in 1924 and, while living in Cyril Mansions in Battersea Park, joined the Inner Temple where he had chambers in Hare Court—the names of his home and workplace inspiring the pen-name by which he is best known today.

Appearing across England, practising in civil and criminal cases variously for the prosecution and the defence, Gordon Clark was, perhaps unsurprisingly, an excellent barrister. He had also begun writing, and a handful of early short stories appeared in *The Bystander* under the name of ‘T. G. Clark’, the ‘T’ representing ‘Taffy’, his childhood nickname. He also wrote a play, *Murder in Daylesford Gardens*, which he would later adapt for his first novel. He was also active in politics locally, speaking often in support of the Conservative Party and chairing the Surrey Federation of the ‘Imps’, the right-wing Junior Imperial League. It was at an Imps event that

Gordon Clark met Mary Barbara Lawrence, also the scion of a wealthy Surrey family. They married in 1933 and the bride—who used her middle name—entered the parish church of St Michael's, Mickleham, to a passacaglia composed specially for her by Ralph Vaughan Williams and built around the notes representing her post-nuptial initials: B, G and C.

As well as being very active socially in Surrey, Gordon Clark continued to advance his career, becoming a recorder—effectively a part-time judge—in 1938. During the Second World War he worked for the Director of Public Prosecutions and in the late 1940s he began serving as a judge. Court reports reveal that his rulings reflect the dry humour of his novels—whether delaying the issue of a caravan licence on the grounds that bad weather was coming, gently rejecting a plaintiff's offer to strip in court to demonstrate the quality of her handmade lingerie, or observing that the courts would be out of business were it not for the proliferation of television hire purchase agreements that proved unaffordable. He was also much in demand as an after-dinner speaker, on one occasion reducing members of Guildford Chamber of Commerce to laughter by observing that, while *their* customers were always right, that most certainly wasn't the case with *his*. In May 1950, he was appointed a county court judge for Surrey, which entitled him, like his father, to serve as a Justice of the Peace.

Gordon Clark's career as a writer took off when, at the age of 36, he submitted *Tenant for Death* (1937) to a publisher. The plots of his novels and short stories often feature constitutional or legal quirks, such as *An English Murder* (1951) and the posthumously published *He Should Have Died Hereafter* (1958). The latter is a problem of inheritance and was surely intended as a tribute to Dorothy L. Sayers, as made apparent in America where the novel was retitled *Untimely Death*. Frequently Gordon Clark drew on his own experience: *Tragedy at Law* (1942) was inspired by a tour as a judge's marshal; and a spell with the Ministry of Economic Warfare informed the opening chapters of *With a Bare Bodkin* (1946). His two main characters were the Scotland Yard detective Inspector Mallett, who first appeared in *Tenant for Death* (1937), and Francis Pettigrew, introduced in *Tragedy at Law* (1942), an eccentric and unreliable loner who owes his career—but little else—to the author.

Alfred Gordon Clark died aged 56 at his home *Berry's Croft* in Westhumble, Surrey, on 25 August 1957. He is buried in the church where he and Mary Lawrence were married nearly 25 years earlier.

One of a small number of uncollected stories by Cyril Hare, ‘The Blackmailers’ was first published in *The Bystander*, 2 January 1929, as by ‘T. G. Clark’.

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DEATH TRAVELS FIRST

John Rhode

PART 1

The scene is a London terminus, at the height of the home-going rush-hour. 6 p.m. on a foggy evening in the black-out. Noise of running footsteps, porters' barrows, rolling of empty milk-churns, etc. The 6.03 down suburban train is about to start. Among the crowd hurrying to catch it are Mrs Jane Frean and Mrs Vera Terry.

MRS FREAN: Come along, Vera! The Firsts are further along, nearer the front of the train.

MRS TERRY: But I'm not travelling first. I can't afford to now that Cecil has lost his job. I'll jump in here and meet you again when we get to Hopton.

MRS FREAN: Nonsense, we must travel down together. I've heaps to tell you. And your ticket doesn't matter a bit. They never look at them on this train. If anybody says anything I'll pay the difference.

MRS TERRY: Oh, I couldn't let you do that, Jane. I'll risk it, if you like.

MRS FREAN: It's sure to be all right. Here we are. This'll do.

(*They get into a first-class carriage, and slam the door behind them. In the carriage are three men, Messrs Reuben Westgate, Harold Palmer and William Burton*)

MRS FREAN: There you are, Vera. You take the corner seat, and I'll sit beside you.

PALMER: I'll shift along, Jane, and you can have my corner.

MRS FREAN: Good gracious, Harold, I didn't see it was you! In this dim light it's impossible to tell who's who. Don't disturb yourself, I shall be quite happy sitting next to Vera.

PALMER: Please yourself. How do you do, Mrs Terry? Have you and Jane been up shopping together?

MRS TERRY: No, I happened to meet her on the platform a minute ago, and she made me come in with her, although I've only got a third-class ticket.

PALMER: Oh, that doesn't matter. Let me introduce you both. The gentleman sitting in the other corner on the same side of the carriage as I am is Mr Burton. My sister, Mrs Frean, and her friend Mrs Terry.

BURTON: Delighted to meet the ladies, I'm sure. Are you quite certain you wouldn't like my corner, Mrs Frean?

MRS FREAN: Oh, quite, thanks very much. Please don't move on my account,

(*There is a rustling of paper, and the fifth occupant of the carriage speaks*)

WESTGATE: Well, Jane, and haven't you got a word to say to me?

MRS FREAN: Well I never, if it isn't Uncle Reuben! The whole family seems to be on this train this evening. Sorry uncle, but how was I to know it was you in this light and with that paper held up right in front of your face?

WESTGATE: I was just glancing through the headlines. They are all one can see these days. Good evening, Mrs Terry. Your husband is quite well, I hope?

MRS TERRY: (*awkwardly*) Yes, thank you, Mr Westgate. Do you know, Jane, I really think I'll get out and find a third. I'm terrified of an inspector coming along and finding me here.

MRS FREAN: Nonsense, Vera, you stay where you are. You'd never find a seat now. Besides, the train's just going to start.

PALMER: I shouldn't worry, Mr Terry. I've never seen an inspector on this train all the time I've travelled by it. And there's plenty of room in here.

BURTON: You'll be a lot more comfortable where you are, Mrs Terry. I always say that five people in a non-corridor first are just enough to be matey. What do you think, Mrs Frean?

MRS FREAN: I'd rather have a non-corridor for a short distance like this. People can't come barging along after the train has started. But what are you doing at this time of night, Uncle? I thought you always caught the 4.55 as regular as clockwork.

WESTGATE: That is my settled habit. But this afternoon I had a caller who detained me in the office beyond my usual hour.

PALMER: Sorry, Uncle, but I couldn't get to your place a minute earlier. And I had hoped our interview wouldn't take as long as it did.

BURTON: You never can tell how long a business interview's going to take. Ah, now we're off!

(*Guard's whistle, sounds of train in motion and gathering way*)

PALMER: Well, we've started punctually, that's one comfort. But we're bound to be late getting in on a foggy evening like this.

MRS FREAN: Fred said he'd meet me at Hopton station in the car, but I hope he won't if the fog's too bad. If he does, I'll give you a lift, Vera.

BURTON: It won't be so thick by the time we get to Hopton, I daresay, Mrs Frean. It's often quite clear a little way out when there's a fog like this in London.

MRS FREAN: If there's a fog anywhere it's always thickest at Hopton. Never mind, Vera, if Fred isn't there with the car, we'll have to walk home together.

BURTON: You two ladies live close to one another, I dare say?

MRS FREAN: Not so very far away. Are you by any chance a citizen of Hopton, Mr Burton?

BURTON: No, Mrs Frean, I may claim to be a neighbour of your uncle, Mr Westgate.

PALMER: Oh, so you're a neighbour of Uncle Reuben, are you, Mr Burton? That must be awfully nice for you, isn't it?

BURTON: Why certainly, Mr Palmer. I often have the pleasure of travelling on the same train as Mr Westgate.

PALMER: That's why we haven't met before, I expect. I usually take care to avoid the trains Uncle Reuben travels by.

BURTON: I'm very glad to have met you at last, Mr Palmer. I hope we shall find an opportunity of continuing our acquaintance. (*He leans forward and lowers his voice confidentially*) I have the greatest admiration for your uncle, Mr Palmer. The success of Powliss and Westgate is due entirely to his brain. One of the hardest heads in the City.

PALMER: Oh, his head's hard enough. In fact I know only one thing harder, and that's his heart. What do you say, Jane?

MRS FREAN: Don't you take any notice of Harold, Mr Burton. He's inclined to be sarcastic, especially after a hard day's work. He thinks it's

smart. Don’t you, Harold?

PALMER: I’m not being sarcastic. I’m merely stating a scientific fact. Ask Mrs Terry if she doesn’t agree with me?

MRS FREAN: Oh, do be quiet, Harold. Vera doesn’t want to be dragged into this. Can’t you talk about something else?

PALMER: A pleasant topic to while away the journey? That ought to be scary enough. How about a discussion of the roseate prospects of Uncle Reuben’s family?

MRS FREAN: Oh, you’re impossible! Do you and Uncle Reuben always travel to and from town together, Mr Burton?

BURTON: Well, I wouldn’t say always. But we generally manage to find ourselves in the same carriage, don’t we, Mr Westgate?

WESTGATE: (*suddenly*) This so-called lighting is positively disgraceful! Some people may like to talk in a train, but I prefer to read my paper, and that’s quite impossible now. I—

(*All this time the sound of the train’s motion has been audible. As Mr Westgate speaks, there is a sudden sharp report*)

MRS TERRY: Oh! Whatever was that?

BURTON: You needn’t be alarmed, Mrs Terry, that’s what they call a detonator. They put them on the rails when the engine-driver can’t see the signals. It means we’re running into Gatcombe, I expect. That’s our first stop.

(*The train slows down and draws into the station. Porters’ voices, ‘Gatcombe, Gatcombe! Change for the Durley branch. Next stop ’Opton, ’Opton the next stop.’ Slamming of doors and general bustle*.)

MRS FREAN: Hullo, Vera, where are you going? This is only Gatcombe, you haven’t got to Hopton yet.

MRS TERRY: Yes, I know. But I’m still terrified in case an Inspector should come along. I’ll run down the platform and get into a third. I’ll look out for you when we get to Hopton, Jane. Good-night, Mr Palmer. Good-night.

(*Her voice fades as she leaves the compartment Chorus of ‘good-night’ from Palmer and Burton. Westgate not so cordial. The train starts again*.)

MRS FREAN: Sorry, Uncle. But I couldn’t possibly know that you’d be in this carriage, could I? Especially as I thought that you always came down by the 4.55.

WESTGATE: And why are you sorry, my dear? You know I'm always glad to see you,

MRS FREAN: Well, it's nice to know that. But you understand perfectly well what I mean. Vera.

WESTGATE: There is no need to apologise. That I found it necessary to discharge her husband is no reason why I should object to Mrs Terry's company.

MRS FREAN: Perhaps not. But it was a bit awkward, wasn't it? You saw how she got out at the first station we stopped at.

WESTGATE: If any awkwardness existed, it was felt entirely by Mrs Terry. And you cannot hold me responsible for the feelings of my late head clerk's wife.

PALMER: (*interposing*) I saw Cecil Terry the other day. He hasn't found a fresh job yet, and he's feeling pretty bitter about it.

WESTGATE: He cannot blame me for discharging him. He was guilty of a breach of confidence, and I had no option. I am certainly not prepared to provide him with a testimonial which would be misleading to a prospective employer.

MRS FREAN: Don't you think you could stretch a point, Uncle Reuben? Cecil is pretty badly hit, and he's finding things jolly difficult. I know that, for Vera told me so herself.

WESTGATE: Why should I stretch a point, as you put it? Because you and Mrs Terry happen to be friends? That hardly seems to me a sufficient reason for committing what in effect would amount to perjury

BURTON: (*sententiously*) You can't write a letter saying a chap's any good if he isn't.

MRS FREAN: I don't care what you say, I think it's very hard on Cecil Terry. He'd been with my uncle's firm, Pawliss and Westgate, for fifteen years, and then just because of one mistake, he gets the sack like this. It isn't fair on Vera and the children.

WESTGATE: He should have thought of his wife and children before and not after he made what you describe as a mistake.

MRS FREAN: How can you by so hard-hearted, Uncle Reuben? You might at least use your influence in the City to get him something to do.

WESTGATE: That would be equivalent to passing on to someone else a half crown that one knew was counterfeit. And I must be allowed to remind you, Jane dear, that I conduct my affairs in my own way.

MRS FREAN: That's true enough. We know that, don't we, Harold?

PALMER: Oh, shut up, Jane. There's another thing you ought to know by now. Once Uncle Reuben has made up his mind, it's no use trying to alter it.

WESTGATE: It is indeed gratifying that my nephew should understand my character so clearly. I hope that he will apply his last remark to his own case.

MRS FREAN: What do you mean? Have you and Harold been at loggerheads again?

PALMER: Oh, never you mind, Jane. It's no business of yours. I'll tell you about it some day, perhaps. (*Report similar to the first*) Hallo, that means we're coming to Hopton.

MRS FREAN: Then I'd better collect my parcels. I hope Fred will be at the station with the car, for I've a lot to carry.

WESTGATE: Anybody but a woman would have her parcels sent to her by post.

MRS FREAN: Oh, that would be too terribly dull. I like to unpack my parcels the minute I get home. You'll come over and see us one evening this week, won't you, Harold?

(*The train has been slowing down and now comes to a stop*)

PALMER: I will if I can manage it. Here, let me open the door for you.

MRS FREAN: Thanks awfully, Harold. I must look out for Vera. Good-night, Uncle Reuben. Good-night, Mr Burton. Mind you come and see us, Harold.

(*Chorus of 'Good-night Jane', 'Good-night Mrs Frean'. Porters' voices: ''Opton, 'Opton, next stop Poppleford. Poppleford the next stop.' Bustle on platform etc*.)

BURTON: Lot of people getting out here. They always do. I've known this train run pretty well empty for the rest of the journey. This is a very popular district, that's why. Does your sister live here, Mr Palmer?

PALMER: Yes, she's got a house about a mile from the station. Her husband's an artist, and isn't doing any too well these days, I'm afraid. It's just as thick here as it was in London. I hope Jane will got home all right.

(*Whistles, etc. as the train begins to move*)

BURTON: We're off again, then. So your brother-in-law is an artist, is he? Artists aren't much in my line, I'm afraid. No, give me grocery. People

will always buy groceries where they can't afford pictures. But I'm sorry to hear that trade is bad with Mr Frean. It must make things a bit awkward for your sister.

WESTGATE: Jane has nobody but herself to blame. I did my best to dissuade her from marrying a man whose means of living were so precarious. She rejected any advice, and she must put up with the consequences.

PALMER: It hasn't occurred to you that a little help now would tide Jane over her difficulties, has it, Uncle Reuben?

WESTGATE: It may have occurred to me, but I have no intention of providing such help. People should learn to be self-reliant, a quality which appears to be lacking in both my niece and my nephew.

PALMER: Thanks, Uncle. I'll do my best to be self-reliant in future.

BURTON: (*impressively*) Mr Westgate's right, you take it from me. I'm a self-made man, and I don't care who knows it. I never had anyone to lend me a helping hand when I was in a tight corner. When I started, I used to run errands with a basket over my arm. And here I am now, riding on a train with a first-class season ticket.

PALMER: It certainly does you credit. Now my uncle here has never known what struggling means. He found his job in the family business ready made for him. He couldn't have helped rising to the head of it in time, even if he'd tried.

WESTGATE: You may remember, Harold, that I offered you a post in the firm as soon do you left school. You refused it, and so missed an excellent opportunity.

PALMER: (*hotly*) Oh yes, you offered me a post all right. Office-boy at fifteen shillings a week, and no hope of a rise for a couple of years at least. How did you suppose I was going to live on that?

WESTGATE: By practising the virtue of frugality. If a man is to climb the ladder of success, he must begin by putting his foot upon the lowest rung.

BURTON: Fifteen bob a week isn't bad. I started on half-a-crown, and my grub in the middle of the day. Out in all weathers, too, delivering customers' orders.

PALMER: Well, the idea didn't appeal to me then, any more than it does now. Besides, I should never have climbed that particular ladder. I haven't got my uncle's ruthlessness. It's only by freezing other people out that he has made all the money he has.

WESTGATE: It is a sound maxim of business that the weaker must go to the wall. And from what you said to me in the office just now, it would not appear that the ladder of your own selection has raised you to any considerable height.

PALMER: Everybody must expect a setback now and again.

WESTGATE: Then they should make provision to meet such setbacks. You understand, do you not, Harold, that my decision is final?

PALMER: Final? Oh yes, Uncle Reuben. Absolutely, I quite understand that.

(*Report of detonator as before*)

BURTON: Why, what are you doing, Mr Palmer? There's no need for you to get up yet. This is Poppleford we're coming to, not Matborough.

PALMER: Yes, I know. But I happen to live at Poppleford.

BURTON: Well, think of that, now. I hoped we should have the pleasure of your company all the way.

PALMER: You won't, I'm afraid. We're not so late after all. Not more than five minutes or so. And from what I can see the fog's thicker than ever.

BURTON: We must expect fog at this time of year. I'm very pleased to have made your acquaintance, Mr Palmer. May I give you my card? Perhaps you'll ring me up one day when you're in town, and we'll have a bite of lunch together.

(*The train stops at Poppleford. Porters as before: 'Poppleford, Poppleford. Next stop Matborough. Matborough the next stop.'*)

PALMER: Well, good-night, Uncle Reuben. I shan't come worrying you again, you can set your mind at rest about that. Good-night, Mr Burton, I won't forget to ring you up one of these days.

WESTGATE: (*severely*) Good-night, Harold.

BURTON: Good-night, Mr Palmer. Pleased to meet you again any time it suits.

(*The door bangs as Palmer leaves the carriage*)

BURTON: What did I tell you, Mr Westgate? With the people there getting out, the train will be pretty well empty from here to Matborough. Your nephew's a very pleasant gentleman, I'm sure.

WESTGATE: Pleasant enough, I daresay. But most improvident, I fear. He is in some financial difficulty of his own making. He called on me this afternoon and begged me to guarantee his overdraft at the bank.

(*The train starts again. Noises as before*)

BURTON: There, there! Well, Mr Westgate, your guarantee would be good for a considerable sum. And no doubt you gave it. Blood's thicker than water, as my sister always says.

WESTGATE: I did nothing of the kind. I am not in the habit of allowing considerations of kinship to influence business matters. The only result of my interview with my nephew was that I missed my usual train home.

BURTON: And that gave me the pleasure of travelling with you, Mr Westgate.

WESTGATE: Oh, yes. And now that we are alone, I have something to say to you.

BURTON: Something pleasant, I hope?

WESTGATE: That is for you to decide. It concerns the proposition that you made to my firm a few days ago.

BURTON: Ah, now we're coming to it. You considered it favourably, of course? Why, it's a chance that wouldn't come your way once in twenty years.

WESTGATE: Possibly not. My partner, Mr Pawliss, and I considered the matter very carefully this afternoon. And in the end we came to the conclusion that we could not see our way to accept your offer.

BURTON: (*slowly and incredulously*) Not accept it? Turn me down, you mean? Why, whatever for? It's jam for you, that's what it is.

WESTGATE: It did not appear in that light to us. I will not hide from you the fact that Pawliss expressed himself in favour of accepting your terms. But as I hold the controlling interest, I was forced to over-rule him.

BURTON: You'll never got such a favourably offer again, as long as you live. What's the matter with my terms?

WESTGATE: They are in my opinion, far too exorbitant.

BURTON: Exorbitant! For what I'm offering you? You're joking, surely, Mr Westgate.

WESTGATE: (*coldly*) It is not my habit to treat business as a joke.

BURTON: Well, I never! Perhaps I might see my way to knock off five per cent for a prompt settlement. How would that be?

WESTGATE: That concession would not influence my opinion that your price is far too high. Were you to suggest a reduction of fifty per cent, I might reconsider the matter.

BURTON: What? Fifty per cent! Halve the sum I proposed? Why that would ruin me,

WESTGATE: I might say, with equal truth, that to close with your present offer would spell ruin for my firm. Halve your price, and we might come to terms.

BURTON: Come to terms with a shark like you? No fear, I've learnt my lesson. Your precious firm isn't the only pebble on the beach, not by a long way. I only approached you first because I wanted to do you a good turn.

WESTGATE: My appreciation of your sentiments does not influence my rejection of your offer.

BURTON: You're a cold-blooded swine, that's what you are, and I'm glad to have had the chance of telling you so—

(*Report of detonator followed in half a second by a second similar report. The train slows up gradually. Immediately following the second report, Mr Westgate utters a sound between a cry and a choke*.)

BURTON: Yes, a cold-blooded swine, and don't you forget it. And that's Matborough we're coming to. We'll part there for good and all. And if we ever happen to travel by the same train again, I'll take precious good care to get into another carriage.

(*A short pause, after which:*)

BURTON: Why, what's the matter with the chap? I haven't shocked him into a fit, surely? Hey, Mr Westgate, Mr Westgate, I say.

(*Sound of a couple of heavy steps on the floor of the carriage, as Burton crosses it*)

BURTON: He's fainted, that must be it. No, by Gad! He's sitting in a pool of blood. He's not breathing, and I can't feel his pulse. He's dead.

(*A short pause, during which the train comes to a standstill*)

BURTON: He's dead! And I'm alone with him in the carriage! I'm off.

(*The carriage door opens and slams violently. Voices of porters, 'Matborough, Matborough! All change here, all change.' One porter in particular comes along the platform, flinging open the carriage doors. 'All change here, all change.' He reaches the door of the first-class compartment, and opens this. 'All change! Why, you in the far corner. All change here, sir!'*)

(*A pause, then sound of tramping as the porter enters the compartment. Then his horrified shout. 'Golly, he's covered in blood!'*)

PART 2

Scene: Inspector Waghorn's room at Scotland Yard.

SERGEANT: They're all here now, Inspector Waghorn, four of them. Shall I show them in?

INSPECTOR WAGHORN: Yes, show them in one at a time. And call out their names as you do so.

SERGEANT: Mrs Jane Frean.

(*Short pause, then:*)

WAGHORN: How do you do, Mrs Frean. Do sit down.

SERGEANT: Mrs Vera Terry.

WAGHORN: Good afternoon, Mrs Terry. You'll find a chair next to Mrs Frean.

SERGEANT: Mr Harold Palmer.

WAGHORN: Come in, Mr Palmer. Will you sit over there, please?

SERGEANT: Mr William Burton.

WAGHORN: Happy to meet you, Mr Burton. There's still a chair left, by Mr Palmer. Thank you, sergeant, that will do.

(*The door closes. Sound of shuffling of feet and scraping of chairs as the members of the party arrange themselves*)

WAGHORN: I have asked you ladies and gentlemen to come here to Scotland Yard this afternoon so that we can talk things over together quietly. As of course you are all aware by now, on the arrival at Matborough yesterday of the 6.03 train from London, the body of Mr Reuben Westgate was found in a first-class compartment. I understand that each of you accompanied Mr Westgate in the same compartment for part of the journey, is that correct?

(*Chorus of replies*)

MRS FREAN: Vera and I didn't know he was in the carriage when we got in—

PALMER: Part of the way only. I got out at Poppleford.

BURTON: Yes, that's right. But—

WAGHORN: Very well, then, let's run through the journey from the start. Which of you was the first to enter the carriage at the terminus?

BURTON: I was. I got to the train five or ten minutes before it started, and took a seat in the first carriage I came to. It was the corner seat nearest the platform and facing the engine.

WAGHORN: The carriage was empty before you got into it?
BURTON: It was. And then a few minutes later two gentlemen came in. I couldn't see who they were, at first, what with the fog and the dimmed lighting. And then I made out that one of them was Mr Westgate. We spoke to him, and—
WAGHORN: Thank you, Mr Burton, that will do for the moment. You entered the compartment in the company of your uncle, Mr Palmer?
PALMER: Yes, that's so. He took the corner seat furthest from the platform with his back to the engine, and I sat down opposite him. Mr Burton spoke to my uncle, who introduced us.
WAGHORN: Thank you, Mr Palmer. Neither you nor your uncle knew, when you entered the compartment, that Mr Burton was already in it?
PALMER: You couldn't tell from the platform whether there was anybody in the carriage or not. Apart from the lighting, the blinds were all drawn, and the window glass obscured by fog and steam.
WAGHORN: I see. Now, Mrs Frean, will you tell us when you got in?
MRS FREAN: I met Vera at the barrier, and we ran up the platform together. There wasn't much time left before the train started, so we opened the door of the first carriage we came to and got in.
WAGHORN: Having no idea who was already in it?
MRS FREAN: As Harold has just told you, we couldn't possibly tell. I shouldn't have got into that carriage if I had known that Uncle Reuben was there, especially as Vera was with me.
WAGHORN: Had you a reason for not wishing to meet Mr Westgate, Mrs Terry?
MRS TERRY: The best of reasons. Not long ago Mr Westgate discharged my husband after he had been with him for fifteen years, and refused to give him a testimonial.
WAGHORN: I see. Now, Mr Burton, where did you get out of the carriage?
BURTON: At Matborough. That's where I live. Of course I didn't know that anything was the matter with Mr Westgate. I just jumped out as soon as the train stopped. I was in a hurry.
WAGHORN: It's rather curious that you shouldn't have noticed anything. But we won't go into that now. After the five of you were seated in the compartment, did anyone else enter it, between London and Matborough?
BURTON: Nobody else came in, but the other three got out.

WAGHORN: I was coming to that. Who was the first to get out!
MRS TERRY: I was. I got out at Gatcombe, the first stop.
WAGHORN: Why did you do that, Mrs Terry? I understand that you live at Hopton.
MRS TERRY: I got out because I didn't want to stay any longer in the carriage with Mr Westgate. I walked along the platform till I came to a third-class carriage and got in there.
WAGHORN: That's clear enough, Mrs Terry. The railway officials tell me that the train was made up with three third-class coaches in the rear, two first-class coaches in the centre, and two more third-class coaches in the front. Did you—go towards the front or the back of the train at Gatcombe?
MRS TERRY: I went towards the back. I knew there were some third-class carriages there, for I had passed them at the terminus, before Jane and I got into the first.
WAGHORN: Thank you, Mrs Terry. Who was the next to get out of the first-class compartment?
MRS FREAN: I was. I got out at Hopton, the second stop, because I live there. I met Vera on the platform, and we had left the station together. My husband was there with the car to meet me, and we gave Vera a lift home.
WAGHORN: Are you prepared to confirm that statement, Mrs Terry?
MRS TERRY: Yes, Jane's quite right. They dropped me at my house, which is only five minutes' walk from where they live.
WAGHORN: That leaves the three gentlemen in the compartment. Where did you get out, Mr Palmer?
PALMER: At the next stop, Poppleford. I live about half a mile from the station.
WAGHORN: Then you got home ten minutes or so after you left the train?
PALMER: Well, no, as it happens, I didn't. I looked in at the Club, which is only a couple of hundred yards from the station, and stayed there for a bit reading the evening papers. You can't read a paper properly in the train nowadays.
WAGHORN: Thank you, Mr Palmer. You didn't get out of the train at Poppleford, by any chance, did you, Mr Burton?
BURTON: Why should I, as I live at Matborough? As I've just told you, I got out of the carriage there as soon as the train stopped.

WAGHORN: Did you have any conversation with Mr Westgate while you were alone with him between Poppleford and Matborough?
BURTON: Oh, we just chatted.
WAGHORN: Quite amicably, I suppose?
BURTON: Oh, quite. Mr Westgate and I were old friends, you know.
WAGHORN: Did you happen to discuss the proposition that you had made to Mr Westgate's firm?
BURTON: What do you know about that?
WAGHORN: Oh, quite a lot. I've been talking to Mr Westgate's partner, Mr Pawliss, you see. He told me that although he was favourable to the proposition, Mr Westgate had refused to entertain it. Now I put to you, Mr Burton, Mr Westgate told you, while you were alone, that his firm had turned down your offer.
BURTON: He may have done. But I don't see that it's anything to do with you.
WAGHORN: It has quite a lot to do with you, Mr Burton. We can take it then that Mr Westgate did tell you, and that something like a quarrel ensued?
BURTON: I wouldn't say that. I told him what I thought about him, that's all.
WAGHORN: I see. Now the railway officials tell me that it was very foggy yesterday evening, and that detonators were in use. Were these audible to any of you during the journey?
MRS TERRY: Oh yes. The first one that went off nearly frightened me out of my wits.
WAGHORN: But no doubt the cause of the report was explained to you, Mrs Terry?
MRS TERRY: Yes. Mr Burton told me it was only a detonator.
WAGHORN: Yes, and I suppose you can also tell us, Mr Burton, when these detonators were exploded?
BURTON: Yes, as we approached each stopping station.
WAGHORN: A single detonator in each case?
BURTON: Yes, except when we were running into Matborough, when two went off, one after the other.
WAGHORN: You are quite sure of that, Mr Burton?
BURTON: Quite sure. There were two reports, one-two, like that.

WAGHORN: And yet the railway officials assure me that only one detonator was laid as the train approached Matborough. However, we need not press that point for the moment. Can you tell me anything of the terms of your uncle's will, Mr Palmer?

PALMER: I don't believe he ever made one. Do you happen know, Jane?

MRS FREAN: I'm sure he didn't. He said to me not so very long ago that he had no intention of making a will until he had at least one foot in the grave.

WAGHORN: Had your uncle any family of his own, Mrs Frean?

MRS FREAN: No, he was a widower with no children. Harold and I were his only near relatives.

WAGHORN: Then if Mr Westgate died intestate, you and your brother become his joint heirs. Now, Mr Palmer, you and your uncle got into the train together yesterday evening. Where did you meet him?

PALMER: I had called at his office. I had a matter of business to discuss with him.

WAGHORN: And your discussion came to a favourable conclusion, I hope?

PALMER: Oh, yes, quite. My uncle agreed to the suggestion I made to him.

BURTON: I say! That's not what Mr Westgate told me.

WAGHORN: What did Mr Westgate tell you, Mr Burton?

BURTON: He told me, after Mr Palmer had got out, that he had asked him to guarantee an overdraft for him, and that he had refused to do it.

PALMER: That's not true! My uncle never actually refused. He—

WAGHORN: Never mind, Mr Palmer. We have no witness either to your conversation with your uncle in his office, or to his with Mr Burton in the train. Now, Mrs Terry, perhaps you can tell us something. What was the attitude of Mr Pawliss, Mr Westgate's partner, towards your husband's dismissal?

MRS TERRY: He was very much upset about it. He told Cecil that he had done everything he could to make Mr Westgate change his mind.

WAGHORN: So that, now Mr Westgate is dead, there is every prospect of your husband being reinstated?

MRS TERRY: I suppose there is. I most devoutly hope so, at all events.

WAGHORN: I should like to ask you rather an impertinent question, Mrs Frean. Are your husband's affairs in a prosperous state?

MRS FREAN: Well, they haven't been for these last few months. Nobody seems to want his work, poor dear. In fact, as Harold knows, things are

beginning to look pretty black for us.

WAGHORN: Were beginning, I think you mean, Mrs Frean. As I remarked just now, your uncle's death will make a very considerable financial difference to you.

MRS FREAN: Well, yes, it will, of course.

WAGHORN: And you are not the only one to benefit by Mr Westgate's death. Mr Palmer will no longer need to seek a guarantor for his overdraft. Again, as Mr Westgate's partner is favourable to Mr Burton's proposition, it will now no doubt be accepted. Finally, as I suggested just now, it is practically certain that Mr Terry will be asked to resume his old position in the firm.

PALMER: This is too much! What are you insinuating, Inspector?

WAGHORN: I am not insinuating, merely stating what may well be facts. And there is another fact upon which you are all agreed. It would have been impossible, at any stage of the journey, for anyone who did not actually enter the carriage, to recognize its occupants. Is that not the case, Mr Burton?

BURTON: Absolutely.

WAGHORN: What have you to say, Mr Palmer?

PALMER: Nobody from outside could have seen who was in the carriage.

WAGHORN: And you, Mrs Frean?

MRS FREAN: When I got in, I couldn't see at first whether there was anyone else in it or not.

WAGHORN: What is your opinion, Mrs Terry?

MRS TERRY: I can only say that if I had seen who was in the carriage I shouldn't have got into it.

WAGHORN: Then you are all agreed. And that, in the light of what I am going to tell you, is significant. Mr Westgate died as the result of a bullet wound in the heart.

MRS FREAN: A bullet! How awful! But who—?

WAGHORN: One moment, Mrs Frean, before we put that question. Mr Burton has told us that he heard two reports as the train approached Matborough, and yet I am assured that only one detonator was laid. One of the reports was undoubtedly that of the firearm with which Mr Westgate was shot.

BURTON: Well, I didn't shoot him, I'll swear to that. I've never fired any sort of gun in my life.

WAGHORN: Further, the shot was fired from the next compartment to the one in which you all travelled. There is a bullet hole through the partition dividing them, exactly in line with the position occupied by Mr Westgate's body as he sat in his corner. And no doubt you all see exactly what that means.

MRS FREAN: I don't, for one. I don't understand it in the least.

WAGHORN: Then I will explain, Mrs Frean. You have all agreed that no one who did not actually enter the compartment could have known that Mr Westgate was in it, much less where exactly he was sitting. That could only have been known to one of his four fellow-passengers

MRS FREAN: Oh? You can't mean—

WAGHORN: I mean that it is clear that one of you four people fired the fatal shot.

(*Chorus of horrified exclamations, after which the Inspector continues*)

WAGHORN: The only way in which that could have been done is for one of you to have changed compartments at some stage of the journey. Now, Mrs Frean, can you produce witnesses as to the time at which you arrived home yesterday evening?

MRS FREAN: Of course I can. My husband who met me at the station, and the servants at the house.

WAGHORN: And you, Mrs Terry?

MRS TERRY: Mr Frean, who gave me a lift home, and my husband and children when I got there.

WAGHORN: If these witnesses testify that you ladies arrived home within a few minutes of the arrival of the train at Hopton, that will be sufficient proof that you could not have gone on to Matborough and returned from there. Now, Mr Burton, will you admit that Mr Westgate told you that his firm intended to refuse your offer?

BURTON: Well, there's no harm in admitting it, I suppose.

WAGHORN: Did you see Mr Westgate at all yesterday, before you met him in the train?

BURTON: No, I hadn't seen him for several days till then.

WAGHORN: You see, Mr Burton, there is no direct confirmation of your statement that you did not leave the compartment until the train reached Matborough. Mr Westgate not being alive to give evidence to the contrary, you might have got out at Poppleford and gone into the next compartment.

BURTON: Well, I didn’t, that’s all I’ve got to say.

WAGHORN: Although there is no direct confirmation of your statement, the admission you made just now proves that you did not. Mr Pawliss tells me that the decision upon your offer was not made until yesterday afternoon. You did not see Mr Westgate until you met him in the train. Mr Westgate said nothing to you about your offer while anyone else was in the carriage. Is that not so?

BURTON: Yes, that’s right.

WAGHORN: Then he must have told you of his decision between Poppleford and Matborough, which means that you must have been in the compartment with him during that stage of the journey. In other words, you couldn’t have been in the next compartment.

BURTON: Well, I never. That lets me out, then?

WAGHORN: It lets you out for the present, at all events, Mr Burton. In fact I do not think I need detain you or the ladies any longer. I will ring for the sergeant to show you out. Good-night.

(*He does so. The Inspector says good-afternoon to Mrs Frean, Mrs Terry and Mr Burton, to which they reply*)

SERGEANT: This way, please.

WAGHORN: Don’t, go yet, Mr Palmer, I have one or two more questions to ask you. Just sit down please.

PALMER: Thank you.

(*The other three troop out and the door shuts. After a pause:*)

WAGHORN: Now that we are alone, Mr Palmer, would you care to give me any further information?

PALMER: What do you expect me to tell you? You’re on the wrong track, if that’s any help to you. None of us did it, unless perhaps it was that chap Burton. I can’t vouch for him, I never set eyes on him until yesterday evening.

WAGHORN: But you have heard your uncle speak of him, I dare say?

PALMER: Can’t say that I have. If he did, the name made no impression on me.

WAGHORN: To the best of your belief, then, your uncle and Mr Burton were not bosom friends?

PALMER: Bosom friends! I can’t imagine Uncle Reuben having been on friendly terms with anybody. He was the most difficult person to get on with that ever lived. And I dare say that’s the secret of it.

WAGHORN: The secret of what, Mr Palmer?
PALMER: Why, who fired the shot, of course. You've no evidence that what Burton told you just now was the truth. He may have been in the next carriage to Uncle Reuben's between Poppleford and Matborough. The only person who could swear to their having been together was Uncle Reuben, and he's dead,
WAGHORN: Yes, he's dead. But you overlook the logic of facts, Mr Palmer. Did your uncle make any mention of the business transaction between himself and Mr Burton while you were in the carriage?
PALMER: Well, no he didn't. But what's that got to do with it?
WAGHORN: Everything. Mr Burton knows that your uncle had turned down his offer. He had not seen your uncle yesterday until they met on the train and the subject was not mentioned while you were in the carriage. Therefore Mr Burton must have been told of your uncle's decision between Poppleford and Matborough. Now let's go on to something else. Were you in an optimistic frame of mind when you reached your uncle's office yesterday afternoon?
PALMER: What do you mean by that?
WAGHORN: This, Mr Palmer. Did you confidently expect that your uncle would agree to guarantee your overdraft?
PALMER: What do you think? You've heard a good deal about Uncle Reuben by now, so you ought to be able to judge. It was a forlorn hope, that was all.
WAGHORN: And I suggest that, the forlorn hope having failed, your position might be described as desperate?
PALMER: My financial affairs are my own business entirely.
WAGHORN: Oh, quite. But you know, Mr Palmer, we are bound to make enquiries. And I am given to understand that unless you could find a guarantor of your overdraft by the end of this week you were threatened with bankruptcy. Your uncle's death occurred at a most favourable moment for you, I think.
PALMER: I won't stand this any longer. You've absolutely no right—
WAGHORN: Please sit down. Our conversation is not at an end yet. Now, Mr Palmer, shall we put it this way? Nor having much faith in the success of your forlorn hope, you provided yourself in advance with a more forceful method of argument. Isn't that so?

PALMER: I don’t know what you’re talking about. I hadn’t the chance of mentioning the matter to Uncle Reuben again.

WAGHORN: No. You employed an argument that needed no words. You have a first-class season ticket, have you not, Mr Palmer?

PALMER: Of course I have. I come up to London nearly every day,

WAGHORN: And that season ticket enables you to travel between London and Poppleford?

PALMER: Yes, naturally.

WAGHORN: The 6.03 from London is timed to reach Poppleford at 6.31. Yesterday the train was five minutes late, owing to fog. What time did you reach the Club, Mr Palmer?

PALMER: (*unsteadily*) I don’t know, I didn’t notice the time. Five minutes after the train got in, I daresay.

WAGHORN: That would be about twenty minutes to seven. As a regular passenger you know the ticket collector at Poppleford pretty well, don’t you?

PALMER: I ought to, for I see him nearly every day of my life.

WAGHORN: He knows you well enough, at all events, Mr Palmer. Yesterday evening he saw you get out of an up train from Matborough. When he asked for your ticket, you showed him your season, which is only available between London and Poppleford. And you went on to explain that owing to the fog you had missed Poppleford on the way down, and been taken on to Matborough, from which you had caught the next train back. And this was at ten minutes past seven. What have you to say about that?

PALMER: Say? What the hell is there to say? You’ve cornered me. Yes, I killed the miserly old brute. It just seemed a perfect opportunity. I got out at Poppleford, saw that the compartment behind was empty—and then had my brainwave. I could shoot him through the partition when the fog-detonator went off. Burton didn’t get a chance to spot me at Matborough—he was away like greased lightning. I was silly, though, about the porter and the ticket collector.

WAGHORN: Had you intended all along to kill Westgate?

PALMER: No. I just couldn’t help myself.

WAGHORN: Then why had you a gun with you?

PALMER: Well, it may seem rather silly to you, but when I went to interview him about guaranteeing my overdraft …

WAGHORN: You were going to threaten him?
PALMER: Not exactly, I was going to try to impress him with the—er—importance of my request by threatening to—take my own life in front of him. But when it came to the point, I felt rather foolish and didn't do it. It wouldn't have worked, anyway.
WAGHORN: (*anxiously*) Have you that gun with you now?
PALMER: Yes, as a matter of fact I have. Here it is.
WAGHORN: Hadn't you better hand it over to me?
PALMER: Not on your life …
WAGHORN: Don't be a fool, Palmer. You'll only make things worse for yourself.
PALMER: Worse for myself? Better for myself!
WAGHORN: Put that thing down!
(*Bang! Fall! Pause*)
WAGHORN: Oh well, I always did hate the idea of hanging a chap.

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JOHN RHODE

The writer best known as ‘John Rhode’ was born Cecil John Charles Street in 1884 in the British territory of Gibraltar, where his father was Colonel-in-Chief of the second battalion of Scottish Rifles. At the age of sixteen, Street left school to attend the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and, on the outbreak of war in 1914, he enlisted. His main contribution to the war effort concerned the promulgation of allied propaganda for which he was awarded the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honours List for 1918 and also the prestigious Military Cross. As well as morale-boosting articles aimed at underlining Britain’s military superiority, he wrote a large number of widely syndicated semi-factual stories in which heroic soldiers endured hardships or defeated the enemy.

With the end of the so-called Great War, Street moved to a new role in Dublin Castle in Ireland, where he was responsible for countering the campaigning of Irish nationalists. During the 1920s, Street seems to have spent most of his time at a typewriter, producing a fictionalised memoir and various political studies, biographies and a wartime romance, as well as short stories and articles on subjects as diverse as piracy and peasant art. While his early books found some success, the Golden Age of detective stories was well underway, so he decided to try his hand at the genre. He created Doctor—or rather Professor—Lancelot Priestley, a former academic whose first case was *The Paddington Mystery* (1925), published as by ‘John Rhode’. Under this pseudonym he wrote nearly eighty novels and one of the first full-length studies of the trial of Constance Kent. But one pen-name wasn’t enough for this astonishingly prolific writer. Street also became ‘Miles Burton’, as whom he wrote over sixty novels, and ‘Cecil Waye’, whose four books featured sibling investigators Christopher and Vivienne Perrin. In 1935, he broadcast a four-part radio series for the BBC, ‘Thoughts of a Detective Story Writer’, in which he described the craft and,

in particular, explained how he had come to write one of his most popular novels, *The Motor Rally Mystery* (1933).

John Street was also a member of the Detection Club and edited *Detection Medley* (1939), arguably the best anthology of stories by members of the Club. He had also contributed to the Club's first two round-robin detective novels, *The Floating Admiral* (1931) and *Ask a Policeman* (1933), as well as the excellent true-crime anthology *The Anatomy of Murder* (1936). Street also helped other Club members with scientific and technical aspects of their own work including Dorothy L. Sayers and John Dickson Carr, who later made Street the inspiration for his character Colonel March, head of *The Department of Queer Complaints* (1940). Street was as ingenious as he was prolific, devising seemingly impossible crimes in locked houses, locked bathrooms and locked railway compartments, and even—in *Drop to his Death*, co-authored with Carr in 1939—a locked elevator. And as well as unusual settings he was adept at devising unusual means of murder, including a hedgehog(!), a marrow and a hot-water bottle; even bed-sheets, soda syphons, car batteries and pyjamas could be lethal in Street's hands. His books are particularly noteworthy for their irony and social observations, and he also defies some of the expectations of the genre, with one novel in which Dr Priestley allows a murderer to go free and another in which the guilty party is identified and put on trial … but acquitted.

After retiring to the south coast, John Street died in 1964. In an ironic twist of fate, his death certificate was signed by Dr Harold Shipman, Britain's most notorious serial killer, who may therefore have counted one of Britain's most notable crime writers among his victims.

One of two radio plays by John Street, 'Death Travels First' was first broadcast on the BBC's Home Service on 2 and 3 July 1940 as part of a series of plays by members of the Detection Club. Other contributors to the series included Nicholas Blake and H. C. Bailey, whose plays—'Calling *James Brathwaite*' and 'The Only Husband'—appear in volumes 1 and 4 of *Bodies from the Library* respectively.

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THE WHOLE TRUTH

Anthony Gilbert

1

Anthony Hooke, K.C., read the letter for the third time, as though some miracle could change its meaning. Yet a first glance had assured him of the danger that threatened his and Janet's peace; even before he slit the envelope he had had a sense of plunging to disaster, but he had envisaged nothing so terrible as the truth.

He did not think of the matter as it affected his pocket. As the writer, who signed himself Jonathan Brodie, observed, 'What's five thousand pounds to a man like Anthony Hooke? He can make it back in less than six months.'

'But I haven't regarded the law as a vocation all these years to succumb meekly to the first blackguard who tries to blackmail me,' Anthony cried to his heart. 'I've always said that the man who gives in is as much the enemy of the community as the blackmailer himself.'

(Only, of course, when a man made these rash generalisations, he never expected to be the one blackmailed.)

'It's lack of imagination, I suppose,' muttered Anthony, getting up and thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his coat. 'You think you'll live a decent sort of life and nobody can touch you. You don't remember that you aren't a single entity.'

There was something in the Bible about that. No man liveth to himself alone. And it was true. He'd seen it again and again in his professional career, and now that truth was being brought home to him with a driving force by this threat against the creature who was the mainspring, the colour, the beauty of his life.

Janet! He drew a sharp breath of pain. So far he had concentrated particularly on the danger the letter offered to her. But now that first poignancy had passed, the meaning of those brutal phrases began to stab

into his mind. For the first time he was compelled to acknowledge what had long lain under the folds of his consciousness since their first meeting as counsel and client.

Such a slender, vulnerable creature she had seemed to him, her deep black shroud enhancing the deathly whiteness of her face, a woman tensely sprung as a fine machine, who might be broken as much by sheer force of circumstance as by the overwhelming weight of the evidence against her.

It was an appalling, unforgettable ordeal for a girl of 24 with five years of terrible married life behind her, to stand before an eager, curious, overwrought community and fight for her life.

Sometimes in his dreams he saw her still, struggling desperately, almost in silence, and always alone, steadfastly denying, denying, denying that she was responsible for her husband's death. How he had loved her courage, her fidelity to himself as her counsel, her partner in this remorseless battle.

'How magnificent she is!' he had thought, walking back from the courts on the third day, when the prosecution had closed its case. 'And if she were happy and safe there'd be no woman to equal her.'

Racked by an anxiety that even his scrupulousness had never known before, he sat up all night going through the case for the defence, testing every point, finding answers—not one or two, but five, six, seven if necessary—to the inconvenient questions of the prosecution or the judge.

And yet, he had to admit it now, he'd never been absolutely sure of her innocence. Even when she said in that steadfast controlled voice that she had somehow managed to maintain all through those five intolerable days, 'I didn't poison Hugo, I didn't, I didn't!' he hadn't been able to convince himself beyond all question that she spoke the truth. The evidence against her was purely circumstantial, but, as the prosecution were swift to point out, no other kind could be expected in the particular circumstances.

'She has a right to the benefit of the doubt,' Anthony had told himself. (That was the nearest he came to acknowledging his fears.) And he took her over the carefully prepared ground, proud of her self-control and loyalty to his instructions, as he seldom had the right to be proud of a client. 'It would be unpardonable to waste such a life.'

But, for all that, she might have done it. Not from cunning or because she'd profit materially, but because Hugo Grieg was wearing her down, driving her beyond sanity, and because she'd rather die on the scaffold, if it

came to that, than end her life in a madhouse. If she did do it, he thought, it was self-defence. But that wasn't a plea he could offer the court.

Fortunately the prosecution hadn't been able to produce a tittle of evidence as to the source of the poison. Grieg's ceaseless watch upon his wife's comings and goings, his pressing of friends and servants into a similar activity, had deprived her of any privacy, denied her the opportunity to arm herself against a brutality that, sadistic in origin, had culminated during the last months of his life in an orgy of humiliation and wretchedness whose sum Anthony wouldn't allow the court to hear, even at the risk of losing sympathy for his client. There were some wounds from which even women like Janet Grieg couldn't be expected to recover.

But even when he got his verdict, and she stepped out of the dock a free woman, that doubt had nagged at him. It might be repressed; it could not be destroyed. It remained unspoken in his mind.

But equally he hadn't been able to forget her. Her beauty and something that mattered to him more than beauty—a kind of radiant vitality not all her sordid experience had been able to quench—haunted him, driving him to seek her out in the little room in a Kensington square where she now copied music manuscripts and gave lessons on the piano to small children of the neighbourhood.

How amazed she had been the first time he had called. She had a little pupil there, a girl of six years old, in a white serge frock, vainly trying to make her fat hands stretch an octave on the piano.

'No good,' she announced with the sang-froid of her generation, 'I'll just have to leave the octaves out when I come to them.'

Janet had discarded her mourning garments; she wore a tunic of some dull gold material that clothed her like a sheath almost to the knees. He thought now that all the radiance she had concealed at the trial blazed out like a flame. He knew then he'd got to have her—who cares about the past? Not Anthony Hooke, crazily, absurdly, magnificently in love for the first time in forty years.

At first they talked commonplaces. 'I like your square,' he said, going to stand by the window and looking over the street where the blue airs of twilight softened the edges of the old houses.

The gardens opposite were locked now; no one used them in winter. The air was full of falling leaves, drifting slowly, as though swayed in

innumerable cradles between earth and heaven; and above them a thin crescent moon, pale as honey, lay on her back in the pearl-coloured sky.

At first Janet would not listen to his proposals. ‘I don’t want to marry you,’ she said, and it was his love rather than his vanity that was stricken to realise that here at all events was the truth. ‘I want to be safe. I’ve never been safe since I was born. For the first time in my life I’ve achieved security. I don’t want grandeur or publicity or friends. I want my own obscure safety.’

Anthony understood that. He had a friend who had been badly shell-shocked in the war, a man of great potential diplomatic gifts, who had enraged his relations by accepting some small, unimportant post in a merchant’s house after the Armistice. He said he’d had enough of limelight; he wanted to be somewhere in the dark where he wouldn’t attract attention, wouldn’t be shot at.

But eventually Janet married him, and in the three years that followed her love, slow to bud, had blossomed into so fiery a beauty that it awed and humbled him. He hadn’t supposed she could display such a capacity for feeling towards himself.

And in those years he remembered with increasing infrequency her earlier life and the doubts that had once invaded his mind. The law had said she was innocent of her first husband’s death. Shouldn’t that be enough for Anthony, a man whose whole career was the law?

But now it appeared that the law had been wrong; he had been justified in his questioning, in his dread. She *had* poisoned Grieg, and this infamous Mr Jonathan Brodie held what was tantamount to her confession in the shape of a letter she had written to him.

‘He’s a clever scoundrel,’ Anthony reflected. ‘He knows that, having been tried and acquitted, she can’t be taken to court again. He doesn’t threaten to send the letter to the Public Prosecutor, but to sell it to the Press, who’d leap at it.’ What a scoop for them! The unveiling of a murderess and her husband—for, of course, they’d never believe he hadn’t known the truth. It meant the end of things for them both.

Anthony was too honest not to admit his passionate love of his job and his instant desolation at the thought of being deprived of it. As for Janet, she’d never face a second experience. It would kill her; she’d take the law into her own hands—*again*, he thought, blenching at the bare idea.

If he hadn’t been able to intercept this letter—hadn’t noticed that others, addressed in a similar hand, had provoked in her moods of incalculable wretchedness—she’d probably have made an end of things without further developments; and for his sake, not her own.

‘But there’s some way out,’ Anthony Hooke assured himself savagely, for what’s the good of being the most famous counsel of your day if you can’t even manage your own domestic affairs?

He heard the clash of the front door, and almost before he could conceal the letter Janet was upon him. She wore a black coat, with a little cape edged with fur, and a tiny black hat with scarlet feather; she came into that chill, unlighted room like a flame, like the sun, like the incarnation of inexpressible beauty. She moved straight to him, setting her hands on his shoulders, lifting her young, lovely face. Joy made her whole body tremble.

‘Oh, darling,’ she said, releasing herself slowly. ‘I suppose one day I shall get accustomed to being married to you. Sometimes I still feel as if it’s a dream, and I rush home in a taxi and peer out of the window to make sure the house really is here and that I belong to it. I could have kissed Raynes tonight when he stepped back and let me in, gave me my own identity again.’

He was dazed by his delight in her. ‘You’re the most definite creature I know,’ he cried. But she shook her head. The little red feather waved, and that made him laugh.

‘What’s the matter? Never mind, you can laugh at me all you like. That’s one of the privileges you don’t share with anyone else alive. But it’s true, what I told you. I don’t seem to have any identity when I’m apart from you.’

He thought passionately, ‘Surely I can save her? What’s the good of loving her as I do, of being rich and powerful, if I’m so pitifully inadequate I can’t prevent her from going through that hell again?’

‘I must go and dress,’ said Janet regretfully. ‘Darling, why must you be so popular? I don’t believe we shall ever have an evening to ourselves again.’

‘We’re not going anywhere tonight?’ he exclaimed in horror.

‘The Berkeleys. Dinner. We’ve broken the engagement twice.’

‘We shall have to break it a third time,’ he told her, harshly. ‘Unless you can rake up another man.’

‘It’s you they want to see,’ she protested.

‘Then it isn’t their lucky night. I’ve got to go out. It’s a job. Can’t be postponed. I only found the letter when I got in.’

She didn’t argue. That was one of the heavenly things about her. She accepted his work at his valuation.

‘If you say so, darling. What is it that’s so urgent? Matter of life and death?’

‘I think so.’

‘You mean—murder?’ Her voice sharpened.

His pose relaxed as he moved slowly across the room. ‘I haven’t quite all the facts yet. But—yes—I think it may be that.’

2

Coming out of his house on Campden Hill later that same evening Anthony accused himself of melodrama. Murder indeed! What folly. You didn’t rush out and murder your neighbour, even if he was blackmailing your wife. Violence is no answer to any problem, as a lawyer ought to know.

It was a clear night, with a sky full of stars; scarcely anyone moved in this quiet backwater of London, though north and south of it the streets were loud with huge scarlet buses and bright with the gold eyes of innumerable taxis. He made his journey on foot; he could not have sat peaceably in a cab while his mind was in such a turmoil. Besides, he had as yet made no plan. The burning necessity of getting that incriminating letter away from Brodie obsessed his mind.

‘If there’s no other way, I’ll pay his price for it,’ he resolved fiercely, watching a smoke-coloured cat run stealthily across the street and disappear into a garden on Palace Green. It was all very well to be fastidious about blackmailers, but when they threatened your heart’s love you forgot about being a good citizen and thought only of her.

Go to the police, he’d told other men. If you pay this iniquitous demand you’re making blackmail easier for other scoundrels. The law’s there to protect you. You’ve nothing to fear. That’s what he’d told them, proud confident untouched fool. How could he tell then what sword would pierce his own heart in days to come?

He strode along, his mind feeding on its own grief and dread; he made a dozen plans only to discard them all. Somehow he’d stop that brute’s mouth. But how? With the five thousand he was demanding? ‘And what

solution's that?' his common sense asked him, with a fine scorn. You'd be delivering not only Janet but yourself into his power. 'Well then, what other way?' His spirit, tormented and impotent, found no answer for him.

'I ought to have some cut-and-dried plan,' he told himself, fearfully. 'I can't walk into the man's flat and knock him down, and insist on having the letter. For one thing, he's certain to be armed. These blackmailers are always cowards. And for another, that would precipitate the very scandal I want to avoid.'

His mind busied itself with practical points—the covering of tracks, the forming of elaborate alibis. Recollections of books he had read plagued his mind, but these were suddenly obliterated by a memory that returned to him of a little French detective, a dark, bow-legged little creature with a mind and a gait like quicksilver.

'Monsieur,' he had cried, eyes sparkling, hands lifted in an incomparable gesture, 'the crimes that succeed are the crimes of courage, of recklessness, the open crimes whose audacity commends them. Read history, read your newspapers. These cautious men, they are never good criminals. Once, perhaps, they may escape, they have good fortune; but for every mark they rub out they leave another, and presently an alert eye—my alert eye, monsieur—sees it, and they are finished.' He threw up his hands, snapping his fingers, with a dramatic conclusive gesture.

'I shall have to chance it too,' Anthony decided. 'If only Janet weren't involved.' And he reflected bitterly that she'd been right, after all, when she said she was safer by herself than any protection of his could make her. A poor music-teacher, with neither funds nor position, would have been safe, because she had nothing to lose.

Brodie's bright blue notepaper, elaborately monogrammed in gilt, had given his address as 61, Mont Park Crescent, and into this wide, old-fashioned by-street Anthony now turned. The houses here were built according to the accepted Regency taste, with massive porticoes, steep steps to the enormous basements, while a second flight climbed to the pretentious front doors.

But all the curtains at the windows were of a different pattern, and when he had climbed the flight from the pavement Anthony saw that the magnificent brass lion-head knocker was green with verdigris.

Brodie had a suite on the third floor, and Anthony walked stealthily up, noticing the signs of corruption on all hands. The white paint of the

staircase was discoloured and chipped, the wallpaper faded with age; above the second floor the carpet was replaced by battered linoleum—drab, unclean, furtive. It seemed peculiarly fitting that Brodie should lodge there.

He had abandoned all efforts of a definite plan of campaign, reminding himself of Martineau's advice: 'Go straight forward, monsieur, if you would be successful; do not take two steps back for every one ahead. That way ruin lies.' So now, reckless in the tornado of emotions that assailed him—rage, impotence and love—he went quickly up the remaining flight and rang the bell of Brodie's flat.

No one answered. 'Out, perhaps,' he thought. 'Is this my opportunity? Is there any way of breaking in?'

But when he tried the door he found the catch had slipped and the door opened under his hand. In front of him was a second door, and this also he opened. Facing him at an oblique angle was a long mirror, in whose brilliant surface he saw the reflection of a man sitting at a desk. Before he could turn his eyes away, the man lifted a revolver and set it to his temple.

Anthony's first coherent thought after the explosion was: 'He must have had a silencer on that or it would have made more row.' Then, the smoke dispersing, he saw that the bullet, tearing its way through the skull, had ricocheted against the old-fashioned telephone instrument on the mantelpiece, and this now lay, the receiver sprawling at the full stretch of its cord, across the shabby Bokhara rug.

In the centre at the disordered room, not three yards from the shattered thing that had been a man, Anthony Hooke, K.C., stood motionless, thoughts pouring through his mind like water pouring into a lock. They drowned his intelligence; he could think of no obvious course to adopt; only, like a dark cloud, the sense of his own peril and Janet's ruin overshadowed him.

He thought stupidly, 'Are there people upstairs? Did anyone hear the shot? Or see me come in?' And he tried to stir that confused mind to clear-cut action.

At last, aware of his danger, he began to move on tiptoe about the room. His time was short; he must escape from the building without being observed; and before he went he must find what he had come for, that mad letter of Janet's, find and destroy it.

The contents of desk and drawers were soon scattered before his gaze; he caught sight of well-known names. Janet wasn't by any means the fellow's

only victim. But the letter he wanted wasn't there. He had to stoop over the body, haul the safe keys out of the dead man's pocket, before he found it. Then, because it's easy to have an accident, and no one must ever see either this letter or the one he intercepted tonight, he dropped on his knees by the hearth and began to burn them, watching with feverish impatience the leisurely destruction of thick sheets of paper, the casual dying of the red spark running along the edge, piling in more and more, since there were a dozen reputations here that would be shattered when the dead man was found.

The ordeal unnerved him more than he had believed possible. He was stiff with a sense of horror, kneeling there with his back to the body, hearing strange sounds, as though someone stirred behind him, and turning sharply he half expected to see that thing with its ruined head erect at his shoulder, the blood dripping over the black suit, stained everywhere with cigar ash. But at last it was done and he'd washed his hands and come downstairs, leaving the Thing undisturbed.

Back in the hall he discovered with amazement that he hadn't been in Brodie's room above half-an-hour. He passed one hand over his face, for his head was aching atrociously, and listened with feverish intensity to the steps passing on the pavement. But so fiercely did his heart beat that such sounds came to him with a muffled note, as though they were heard through water.

He made half-a-dozen false starts, aware that this was the last, the most poignant danger of all, that he might be recognised as he left the house, but when at length he plucked up courage to open the door he found the streets obscured in a haze of fog, through which the black railings looked vague, and which made identification impossible.

As he walked slowly home a host of new impressions and considerations were jumbled in his mind. In spite of his vivid imagination, his deep and genuine sympathy, his varied experience, never until tonight had he been able to regard such a situation as his own from the criminal's point of view. For the first time he knew in his own blood all the tremors and hesitations, the reactions and the fears, that beset men who know themselves in imminent danger.

Involuntarily he found himself thinking, 'What clues did I leave behind? Can they prove I was in that room tonight? Have I done anything that will enable the police to link up my name with that of the dead man? How long must I wait before I know I'm safe?'

That was the worst question of all.

Janet was out when he reached home. He found a note scribbled on an envelope in his library. *'Gone to the pictures with the Arnotts.'* He glanced at the clock; she wouldn't be back just yet. It was only 10.45, though an age seemed to yawn between the hour of his setting out and this of his return. For her absence he was grateful. It gave him more time to prepare himself.

Yet a moment later his apprehensions leaped on him, pointing out that the envelope on which the single line was scrawled was that in which Brodie's letter had been enclosed. Like a fool, he'd left it among his papers when he went out. Now it lay face downwards on the desk. Ah, but had it been face downwards when she came into the room? Or had she seen it, realised its meaning, taken her swift decision and ended the situation in the only way possible to her? He tried to calm his anguished nerves, but the dread persisted.

Up and down the room he went; now it was eleven, now eleven-fifteen. He took the receiver off the telephone: there were hospitals where casualties were taken, police stations where they detained crazy women who tried to take their own lives.

He rang up the Arnotts, but they were out; they'd gone to a show and said they might have supper later. Anthony hung up the receiver. He must wait, not make a fool of himself with the authorities, who might be trusted to remember, that in the morning when everyone was talking of the dead man in Mont Park Crescent.

Up and down, up and down he tramped, his brain filled with horrible visions of Janet's drowned face, Janet smashed by the wheels of a car, Janet dying quietly from poison somewhere on a street bench. His heart was breaking with misery before she returned.

She came in at midnight, saying, 'Darling, a wonderful show. I do wish you'd been there. You look as if you'd had the most ghastly evening. Is it a very hopeless case?

'He looked at his fingernails so that he need not look at her. 'I—don't—know,' he answered slowly. 'I don't think I've got all the facts yet.'

Her voice dropped appreciably. He could feel the change in her, a remoteness he had experienced before, as though they no longer occupied common ground.

‘It’s essential, I suppose, that you should always have the whole truth? Has it never seemed to you as if sometimes part of the truth may be more successful? There are so few people capable of accepting or appreciating what’s true. They rely so much on bare fact; they don’t even try and discover what lies underneath. Truth’s so much more than just action; it’s motive and opportunity and impulse. Facts are like the bricks with which children build castles; you can make a dozen patterns, but they’re all the same bricks.’

Anthony’s voice, when it came after a long pause, sounded utterly exhausted.

‘All my life I’ve realised that,’ said. ‘It’s that that makes me so afraid tonight.’

3

Fear was his first recollection when he woke to the new grey day. He could scarcely wait to see the morning papers, though he told himself repressively that so soon as this it was unlikely there would be any mention of the tragedy. He was, he believed, prepared for anything, and it was surely proof of his own nervous exhaustion that his reaction to what he found, tucked away at the foot of the middle sheet, should be one not merely of shock but of amazement.

MAN FOUND SHOT IN LONDON FLAT.
SUSPECT DETAINED.

Not first-class news yet,’ he told himself bitterly, ‘but it will be as soon as my name and Janet’s are dragged in.’ Once you’d been tried for murder or married the woman you successfully defended you were always news. And times were dull, and such a sensation would be more than welcome.

But presently contempt for himself, his own blindness and self-absorption, replaced his surprise. For surely he, of all men, should have anticipated this.

‘Every time I go into court, it’s to defend a fellow who’s wrongly accused,’ he told himself. ‘What criminal conceit to imagine that, because I’m personally involved none of these complications would arise. And now —what do I do?’

What indeed? The obvious course was to go to the police at once.

‘The detained man, Roger Guest, couldn’t have killed Brodie at 10.20,’ he’d say. ‘Because the fellow was dead at least an hour before.’

And what answer could he make but the outrageous truth? ‘Because I was standing by his body, searching his flat, destroying his papers.’

How the questions would start flying then, like the proverbial fur.

Why didn’t you communicate immediately with the police? Was the deceased known to you? What was the nature of the manuscript you burned in the grate? And inevitably it would emerge that Brodie had been a witness, a prominent witness in the Grieg trial four years before.

Janet’s name would be on everyone’s lips. Of course, the dead man was a bought witness; that would be their explanation, and in a rash moment he’d pressed Hooke further than the fellow would go. Authority and the public would have to be as noseless as the notorious fallen sons of Eve not to smell a rat here.

If they compelled him to admit the existence of the letter it was farewell to his career and Janet’s joy. They’d ask how he’d proposed to get it from Brodie. Paying for it? Hardly. By violence, then? And how far was violence to go?

‘How far would they assume I’d intended it to go?’ he amended grimly. ‘Lord, what a stew. I wonder what the case against this fellow is. They’re very discreet as yet, but it’s long odds he’ll be charged within twenty-four hours. And if he is, what’s the next step?’

Only one explanation could meet the case, and that was suicide, and if so, what was the motive? But perhaps the police could supply that.

‘I might not hang,’ decided Anthony, strapping on his wrist-watch and taking a clean handkerchief from the corner drawer. ‘I might get off on a “Not Proven” verdict, but how much satisfaction is that to a man in my position? And Janet holding herself responsible for the rest of her days?’

What, then, was the alternative? He paced up and down in a fever, seeking a way out. Often enough in the past he had been up against a similar barrier and he had found the very opacity of his problem stimulating and quickening. He’d enjoyed storming the impregnable fortress of fact.

Sometimes he had wondered at his inability to kindle a similar flame of excitement in his client of the moment. Some were almost lethargic. He understood that now, seeing nothing round him but difficulty and fear, hurt for Janet and ruin for himself.

And then in an instant the picture in his mind changed and he thought of that man they had got at the police court, the man whom they'd be bound to charge unless someone came forward to clear his name.

Roger Guest was, in fact, charged that same afternoon. The evening papers had the story. It appeared that he wasn't on good terms with Brodie, who seemed to be a pretty average blackguard all round—there were ugly stories of share-pushing as well as blackmail—and Guest had gone to see him on the evening of the man's death.

Soon after ten o'clock he'd been found by a postman standing beside the body, the revolver in his hand, blood on his clothes, ash on his fingers. The fog had delayed the mails, and the evening deliveries were half an hour behind time.

'Hullo,' said the postman. 'What's all this?'

The young man lifted a greenish face. 'He's shot himself,' he said. 'He's smashed to blazes.'

'And what are you doing here?' the postman wanted to know.

'I—oh, I came to see him. I've just arrived.' He stared round the disorganised room. 'I suppose this is a job for the police. No use calling a doctor. He's as dead as mutton.'

The postman, a shrewd individual, with more beard than was becoming, and the marks of fog round his tired eyes, looked appraisingly round the dishevelled room. Drawers had been so hurriedly slammed shut that corners of papers were caught in the cracks; someone had had a miniature bonfire in the hearth; a grandfather clock against the farther wall had had the face damaged, and the hands stood at 8.10. The telephone had been overturned, and papers lay scattered over every table and desk in the place.

'Just come, have you?' repeated the postman slowly. 'Well, that's queer, seeing I've been standing talkin' to the policeman outside for ten minutes good, and we never see anyone come up. Reckon I better call him.'

The young man had remained dazed until the pair reascended the stairs. He repeated his story; he'd come to see Brodie on business—no, they weren't on very good terms. They had come to a point when some definite decision must be made; it was for this purpose that Guest was here tonight. The question between them was a financial one.

'It was of considerable consequence to you?'

'It was a matter of life and death,' cried the impetuous young man.

‘And you’d been burning his papers?’

‘No, he must have done that himself before he took his own life.’

‘You’re very sure he killed himself?’

‘Well, I didn’t kill him. I dare say, though, there were plenty of people who’d be glad to lend him a hand.’

‘That’s no way to talk,’ the postman reproved him sharply. The policeman only asked: ‘How did you get in?’

‘The same way as our friend here.’ He indicated the postman. ‘I knocked on the door, then found it wasn’t locked. There’s something wrong with the catch.’

‘Oh, you had time to notice that.’

‘After I found him dead I did.’

‘Funny, isn’t it, that you should stop to examine a lock instead of calling the police right away?’

Guest had nothing to say to that. Questioned about the ash-smears on his fingers, he said that he’d examined the heap in the grate. Brodie had had a very indiscreet document of his, and he wanted to make sure it wouldn’t be made public property. That was why he hadn’t at once given the alarm.

Anthony read all this with a curious growing fascination. Each fresh quotation seemed another thong to bind not Guest, but Anthony himself. The answers the unfortunate man had given were almost identical with those he himself must have offered had it been he and not the accused whom the postman had discovered in the disordered room.

What sort of a defence, then, would he, the barrister, the man of law, the man of shrewd and imaginative experience, put forward were their positions reversed? Again, suicide was the only answer, and he had yet to learn that there existed a single fact to bulwark such a suggestion.

Twenty-four hours later the position had altered once more. Anthony received a visit from a man called Reuben Silver, a solicitor of hard-headed experience and driving personality. He came to the point at once.

‘I don’t know how busy you are, Hooke, or how much you’ll appreciate a case involving very little cash and even less kudos. But my man’s in a tight corner and I can think of no one so suitable to extricate him as yourself.’

‘What his name?’

‘Guest. The fellow they’ve taken for this Brodie Mystery. I warn you he’ll be a handful, one of these temperamental chaps, up in heaven one minute and has hell any depths they haven’t plumbed the next? The kind

that’ll run away with your story in the witness-box if you give him a chance. And it won’t be safe not to put him there—it makes a jury so suspicious and we’ve not got much on our side to begin with.’

‘I’ve seen the newspaper report. He seems to have had the sense to keep his mouth shut as to the actual hold Brodie had over him.’

‘It’s not a very pleasant story; it’s bound to prejudice his chances if it all comes out, and it’s going to be very difficult to hush it up. Oh, don’t make any mistake about it. The case against the fellow’s as black as a witch’s cat; and he seems to have done his best to make it worse. He left fingerprints all over the place, including the butt of the revolver.’

‘And the defence?’

‘Suicide.’

‘Anything to back it up?’

‘Oh, there’s motive enough. The police were after this fellow; they’d actually come to his home with a warrant for his arrest for fraud on a large scale, but he got rid of them by pretending to be his own servant.

‘But he must have had wit enough to realise he couldn’t pull the wool over their eyes for long. And he’d always said he’d put a bullet in his brain rather than go to quod. It was his revolver, too. He was a dirty dog, Hooke. You mustn’t let this other fellow hang for him.’

The face Hooke turned towards his companion was troubled, even apologetic. Silver was astounded at the brilliance and ardour of Anthony’s gaze.

‘I’ll do it,’ he exclaimed. ‘Never mind about the fee. And, by Jupiter, I’ll get the fellow off. There’s nothing truer, Silver, than the observation that the ways of providence are not our ways. Who’d have thought of this solution?’

It was not until he told Janet the news that he realised there was a third and hitherto unconsidered aspect of the case. He’d thought of Guest’s point of view, and his own, but what of Janet’s? When he mentioned Brodie’s name she turned white as paper, stretching blind hands to catch his arm.

‘Anthony, you haven’t promised? You mustn’t. Don’t you realise who Brodie is? You’ll see your name and mine on every hoarding.’

‘Do we care?’

‘It’s more than my life to me.’

‘And Roger Guest’s life to him.’

‘It’s the only big favour I’ve ever asked of you since we were married,’ she pleaded.

‘It’s one you’ve no right to ask, ever. It’s Guest’s one chance.’

She cried eagerly. ‘But’s that’s arrogant, Anthony. There are other men, men with big names and reputations, men with shrewd wits. You’re not the only K.C. in London.’

‘No, but I’m the only man in the world who can prove—prove, Janet, beyond all question—that he didn’t kill Brodie. I’m the only man who knows it out of his own experience. And that’s why no one else must defend him at the Old Bailey.’

4

Anthony had defended a number of men on a charge of murder before this case of Roger Guest came his way, and he had supposed he knew all the variety or reaction to which men in such desperate circumstances are liable. Sullen, defiant, deliberately mocking, terrified, assured, trembling, immovable, for all these he was prepared; but Roger Guest was something new to his experience.

As the K.C. entered the cell where the interview was to be conducted, he was aware of something as definite and as terrific as a physical impact, the force of a personality that even this peril, this ghastly apprehension, could not dull.

A young man—Guest was 27—leaped up as though controlled by a spring, as Anthony entered. He was rather below average height, with the deep-coloured face of a man accustomed to being much in the open air, dominated by a prominent, bony nose much too large for the face, to which, notwithstanding, it gave its peculiar character. A black smudge of moustache, as black as the sleek hair that was brushed away from the forehead, twitched with every pregnant gesture and exclamation.

Indeed, thought Anthony, he had never seen a face that gave such an effect of being made of india-rubber and he began to wonder if he’d ever seen it on the films, and if not, why not?

‘This is frightfully good of you, Mr Hooke,’ began the irrepressible young man offering a chair with an expansive gesture that would have graced a head waiter. ‘I suppose Silver has warned you I haven’t a bean, and this isn’t a very savoury affair.’

Anthony’s brows shot up. ‘Presumably he took it for granted that you’d tell your own story,’ he remarked drily, struggling with this sense of being

engulfed in a tidal wave that might in an instant sweep him off his feet, pound him into the shingle, overwhelm and master him. It was an unusual sensation and he appreciated while he combatted it.

‘Oh, quite, but what I mean is, are you bound to the bargain before you’ve heard all the details? I dare say you won’t like the sound of them.’ His mobile face twisted into an expression of vivid concern.

‘I’ve accepted the brief,’ Anthony pointed out. ‘You do realise what that means?’

‘You mean, it’s like the chap in the Bible who, having put his hand to the plough, couldn’t draw back? No, I didn’t know that. Suppose you can’t stand it?’

Anthony drew a ship with a Union Jack flying half-mast on the notebook before him. ‘You’re not working up to confession?’ he suggested.

‘Well, I’m afraid I am. Not a confession of murder,’ he added hurriedly. ‘But something that will make things look pretty black for me.’

‘You’d better start at the beginning. What do you do—for a living, I mean?’

‘I’ve got a small orchestra—l conduct. I’ve been working it up for about two years. I make about eight pounds a week off it. It’s meant a lot of work and taking chances. Before that for some time I played fiddle in a cinema orchestra, and before that I fiddled outside pubs in the outer suburbs on Saturday nights and caught pennies in a hat. It means a good deal to me, besides just the living.’

Anthony nodded. So much was obvious. The fellow was the incarnation of rhythm, not the smooth dignified rhythm of the generation to which he himself belonged, but the restless, sing-song, irresistible rhythm of the jazz age. He said, ‘A jazz band, I suppose,’ and young Guest corrected him quickly. ‘A dance band. Oh, only a small affair, but it’s young yet.’

He waved his hands a little excitedly as he spoke; he was as lively as one of his own instruments. Vitality poured out of him; Anthony put his hands in his pockets; he felt in a minute he might fling them in the air, strike a romantic pose, so infectious was his companion’s enthusiasm. It was like walking suddenly into a swarm of bees.

‘Where does Brodie come in?’ he asked. ‘That’s the critical point.’

Guest sobered at once. His quietness, after his earlier exuberance, had a chilling effect.

‘About four years ago,’ he said, ‘I was in with Frome. I was as ambitious as Lucifer, and Frome was very good to me. I’d been doing odd jobs in fourth-rate orchestras, with long gaps in between; I hadn’t a copper, and I knew what it was to be not just hungry, but half crazy for food.

‘Frome was a careless chap, with stacks of money; he flung it about in all directions. He has a way of taking people up, you know, and giving them the time of their lives. But, of course, every man has his limitations. His were that he had no idea what it’s like to be hard up. He spent a lot of money himself, but he expected you to be able to spend it, too. And of course even then I wasn’t making much. But it wasn’t safe to tell him that.

‘I had a shy once at explaining how things were and he stared at me as if I were something from under a flat stone. He simply couldn’t understand. And I got the wind up; I saw him dropping me. I saw myself going back to those days of destitution and fear and no hope anywhere, that I’d known before I met him. And it would be worse now, after what I’d had. I couldn’t face it. But I couldn’t face my expenses either and—well, the long and the short of it is I did the dirty on Frome.’

‘I told you he was frightfully casual about money, never filled in his counterfoils, never counted his change, didn’t know within five pounds how much money he had in his pocket-book, and one day I—it’s a criminal offence, I know—I forged his name to a cheque for £200. Pretty rotten, what?’ He shot a nervous, eager glance at his counsel.

‘You’re not being tried for embezzlement,’ said Anthony calmly. ‘No amount of forgery makes you a murderer in itself. I suppose Brodie got his hands on the cheque?’

‘Yes. He did the job on a big scale, you know. He liked to boast of it, though he’d say that he didn’t make a living out of other men’s shortcomings any more than the lawyers did, or the judges or the magistrates. He was rather proud of his record. He told me once I’d be surprised to know some of people whose security he held in his dirty hands. He revelled in it. Liked to think of all that power operating from his little flat.’

‘And he was threatening you?’

‘Yes. He wanted money. He asked me for £500. He must have known I couldn’t raise it.’

‘Did you tell him so?’

‘Yes. He said I’d found a way of raising it before.’

‘Quite. By the way, did Frome know—or prosecute?’

‘He knew. He didn’t prosecute. Apart from anything else he wouldn’t have taken so much trouble. I told him I’d pay him back. Of course, that didn’t cut any ice. It wasn’t the money that mattered. What’s £200 to him?’

‘Have you paid any of it back?’

‘One hundred and twenty pounds. And I’ll pay him the rest. We’re beginning to get known. We broadcast the other day. You didn’t hear it, I suppose? It was a great night.’ And the incredible young man leaned forward, quivering with enthusiasm, regardless of his own danger. ‘That’s the sort of thing that makes life worth living.’ His own words recalled him back to sobriety. ‘Lord, I was forgetting.’

I want you to tell me your own story,’ Anthony encouraged him. ‘I’ve heard the police story and Silver’s story, but I want yours. Don’t slur details because you think they’re unimportant. You’re not trained to know what’s important and what isn’t.’

‘It’s short enough. I told you Brodie was on to me, must have £500 by hook or by crook. I said I couldn’t raise it, and it wouldn’t help him to break me and the band. He’d have done it for sheer malice. He said there were always ways of getting hold of things if you needed them badly enough. I said he couldn’t make me a criminal again, and he said, couldn’t he?

‘He could do anything he pleased. He’d once driven a woman to murder, if she had cheated him afterwards. I dare say that was a lie, though. But he said something else that stuck in my mind. ‘All you chaps think of is your own skins,’ he said. ‘It never occurs to you that other people may have bad luck.’ I didn’t know what he meant, but if he was relying on my £500 to get him out of a jam he hadn’t much hope.’

‘The police were after him,’ Anthony explained, ‘and they got him at a time when he was without money. Any expert will tell you that you may as well sign a confession and throw in your hand as try and get away without ample funds. He knew that.

‘You’re going for a suicide verdict, sir?’

‘What other?’

‘It won’t be popular. People don’t like suicide.’ He said it with such vehemence, so much genuine perplexity, that Anthony laughed abruptly.

‘This isn’t a film story,’ he reminded his client. ‘This is reality, less dramatic perhaps, but having the value of solid foundations.’

He began to take his man over the points of the story. ‘Why did you go down and see Brodie at all?’

‘Because I’d got to the pitch where nothing could be worse, and if he meant to smash me and the band, well, I’d have my shot at smashing his beauty first. I know I couldn’t stop him, but I like to pay my debts, if it’s only five bob in the pound. And I found him, as I said, shot to hell.’

‘And that was a shock to you?’

‘It was like a miracle. It was too marvellous to be believed. I stood there simply humming with excitement. I didn’t even wonder who’d done it.’

‘For your own sake, let me advise you to be more discreet when you’re in the witness-box. Well, I suppose you began to look for the cheque?’

‘Yes. With providence handing me such a colossal tip I wasn’t going to chuck it away. But I couldn’t find it. There was a lot of burnt paper in the hearth. It might have been there. Of course, I couldn’t tell, though I fingered it messily enough.

‘I thought how like him to keep me—us—all the people in his power—dancing on a string. I came and stood by him and asked him what the devil he’d done with it. That’s when the postman intervened.’ He dragged a dark silk handkerchief out of his sleeve and mopped his face. ‘As a matter of fact, with no disrespect to you, I fancy I’m pretty well dished anyway. Once this story about Frome is out it’s back to the gutter for me, even if I don’t swing.’

‘Try and believe what I’m going to tell you,’ said Anthony impressively. ‘That story about Frome isn’t coming out. I realise the fatality of it at least as well as you do. I should consider I’d hopelessly failed my client if I let that become public property.’

The young man stared. ‘But—can you prevent it?’

‘Yes. There’s a superstition that in affairs like this Fate holds the winning card. This time she’s chosen to play it on your side. I’ve got it in my pocket at this moment. Whatever cards the prosecution put down, this overtrumps them all.

5

The Old Bailey was crowded for the trial of Roger Guest. Anthony’s opposing counsel was Mr Thomas Larke, a humourless man below medium height, with a dollop of red-coloured hair above a high forehead, circular

grey eyes and a long mouth. Not for him were eloquence, wit and charm, nor the sweeping gesture, the winning smile, the flair that is a triumph in itself. Stolidly he elicited facts and spread them before the jury, ‘like a pound of sausages laid out on a counter,’ Anthony thought ruefully.

This absence of manner gave him an inevitable advantage. A man who could afford to dispense with all the trimmings of the law must, thought the simple-minded public, have a very strong case, if he required looking beyond the facts to obtain his verdict.

He opened the case in a level, unimposing voice, explained the nature and value of circumstantial evidence, and proceeded to call his witnesses. The doctor, the policeman, the postman and a young man, a friend of the prisoner, called Chaloner, who had dined with Guest on the fatal night, sustained his case.

‘You remember the time that you and the prisoner separated?’ Larke asked the last witness.

‘We had some food together about eight o’clock at a brasserie, and then I went on to a show. I wanted Guest to come with me, but he said he couldn’t; he had to see a man.’

‘Did he tell you for what time the interview was fixed?’

‘I said, “It’s a bit late, isn’t it?” and he said, “I must see him tonight.”’

‘He mentioned no name?’

‘No. I thought he might be a moneylender.’

‘Why should you think that?’

‘Because he’d been bothered about money lately. We wondered if things were going badly with the band.’

‘And he was anxious, you say?’

‘He said, “My God, if the band goes, I’m done. It’s everything to me.” It was, too.’

‘And what time did he leave you?’

‘About a quarter past nine. We sat some time over the meal.’

That established a valuable point for the Crown. For how was Guest to explain that lapsed hour during which Brodie was most probably killed? According to his own account, the young man hadn’t entered the flat until ten o’clock, though it was only ten minutes distant from the brasserie where he’d dined. The court simmered with excitement.

Anthony was watching his client. Loyal to his counsel, Guest sat quiescent, his thin hands clasped between his knees, his alert, intelligent

gaze sweeping the court; he didn't betray a particle of fear, but who knew what was going on behind that frail structure of skin and bone, the brightness of the eyes, the resolute fold of the lips under the black moustache?

Not Anthony, not Larke, not the judge. Anthony's heart ached as it hadn't done since he'd defended Janet on a similar charge. Innocent or guilty, the prisoner nearly always had to suffer more than his victim.

And now it was the turn of the defence. Guest's life would depend on the next hour or so. Anthony felt the familiar rush of blood, the pounding of his heart, the pricking, choking sensation that still assailed him when he stood up in court and remembered that a man's life was in his hands.

His opening speech was as brief as Larke's had been. He pointed out to the jury that the prosecution had produced only two facts of importance, facts that he considered quite irrelevant the one to the other. The first was that Brodie had been shot dead, and the second that, on the same night, Guest had visited his flat.

He submitted that no evidence had been offered to link together the two events. According to medical evidence, death could have taken place at any time from eight o'clock onwards, while it was improbable that it had occurred after half-past nine, which presumed that the prisoner had walked straight into the flat and shot his man through the head without any parley at all.

'There is another point that has not so far been mentioned,' he continued, 'and that is the presence of a towel in the washroom opening out of the dead man's apartment. This towel has been examined and several of the stains on it are shown to be stains of coal-dust and ash. Whoever destroyed those papers, gentlemen of the jury, made those marks on the towel.

'The prosecution has told you that, when he was discovered by the postman, Mr Guest's hands were badly soiled by ash, and he will admit that he had been examining a pile of ash that he found in the grate upon arrival. Is it suggested that a third person visited the flat, was responsible for the bonfire and subsequently used the towel? The prosecution has put forward no such plea.

'The sole alternative, therefore, is that Brodie himself destroyed the papers and then washed his hands. I now propose to call witnesses to prove to you that, whoever was responsible for Mr Brodie's death, it could not have been the prisoner.'

It was confidently anticipated that Guest would be the first to give evidence on his own behalf, but to the surprise of the court Anthony called a police official named Bowman, who entered the box and took the oath.

‘You visited Mr Brodie on the night of his death?’ Anthony began.

‘Yes, sir. I had a warrant for his arrest on a charge of fraud.’

‘You saw Mr Brodie?’

‘Yes, sir, though I didn’t realise it at the time. A man in shirt-sleeves opened the door to me, and when I asked for Mr Brodie he said he’d gone down to Bournemouth about an hour earlier, and gave me the address of his hotel.’

‘Do you know what the time was then?’

‘That would be about half-past seven. I remember, because I thought if Mr Brodie had only left about an hour ago he wouldn’t be at Bournemouth yet, and we ought to be able to get the police to take him as he left the train. I looked up the train he must have caught.’

Larke had no questions to put to this witness, who gave place to a square-built man in a black suit, who created a sensation by entering with a police escort.

Anthony explained to the judge: ‘My lord, I have permission to call this witness who has been released from prison for the purpose.’

The new witness gave his name as Thomas Baldwin Jay. The dead man had been his partner for more than two years, and had been implicated in the flotation of various companies whose activities had been a matter of subsequent police inquiry. Jay was himself awaiting trial on a charge of large-scale fraud, and in other circumstances Brodie would have been wearing similar shoes.

These facts being established, Anthony asked, ‘And when did you last hear from Mr Brodie?’

‘On the day before his death. We both of us realised that matters had reached a crisis, but we hoped that even at the eleventh hour we could avert disaster. On the 14th, that is, the day he was found shot, I was out, endeavouring to raise sufficient funds to cover our liabilities.

‘When I came in about nine o’clock my man told me that Mr Brodie had rung through three times. He said the matter was extremely urgent; wouldn’t leave a message. I tried to telephone at once, but I couldn’t get any reply. I rang up the engineers and asked if anything was wrong with Mr Brodie’s number. They told me the receiver had been taken off, the hook

and though they'd done their best they couldn't attract the subscriber's attention. Presumably there was no one there.

'I didn't know what to make of that. Brodie might have wanted to tell me it was all right, or he might have wanted to warn me. I couldn't tell. I got the engineers to make one further inquiry, but with no better results.'

'And in the light of what happened later you suppose he was trying to warn you?'

'Yes. I'm convinced of it.'

'Had you ever heard Mr Brodie speak of possible arrest or imprisonment?'

'He always said he'd take his own life first. He must have known he was playing a dangerous game. He carried a revolver wherever he went.'

'And when you heard he was dead?'

'I took it for granted he'd committed suicide. He must have known he couldn't pull wool over the eyes of the police for long.'

lt was now obvious to the Court that the telephone had been out of action since nine o'clock, at which hour the prisoner was still in the company of his friend, Chaloner. Further evidence was called, of a purely technical nature, to show that the firing of the bullet was responsible for the damage done to the instrument.

So that, after all, the court was deprived of its greatest sensation, because the prisoner didn't go into the box at all. The jury gave it as their verdict that you couldn't, on such evidence, do anything but acquit the prisoner, and the judge closed the case.

Anthony came out thoughtfully into the December dusk. The first glory of sunset burned in a strip of rosy gold along the horizon; over a vista of squalid roofs and chimneys a single spire, lovely in its simplicity, was pencilled against the glow.

He moved slowly, watching the people hurry past, and thinking of the diversity and beauty of life; he thought of Guest speeding back to his beloved band, of the jurymen returning to their homes and their private unguessed-at lives, of the enchanting mystery of personality, and the fire one mind and heart strike from another.

Suddenly he felt a light touch on his arm and, turning sharply, discovered Janet at his side. In her black clothes, her face thin and pale with anxiety, she seemed like a shadow in that dim light.

‘Were you in court?’ he asked, in surprise.

‘Of course I was. Did you think I could wait at home with so much at stake? Anthony, when I realised that your life depended on that chance telephone call of Mr Jay, I wondered how it’s possible to talk of the logic of the law.’

‘Purely fortuitous evidence,’ Anthony agreed cheerfully. ‘But the final point so often is. Read any of the big criminal cases.’

‘If it hadn’t been for that,’ Janet pursued, ‘I suppose you’d have stood up in court and told everyone that it was you—you—who killed him.’

‘Certainly I shouldn’t,’ cried Anthony, indignantly. ‘I may not chuck truth at these people wholesale, but I shouldn’t offer them a barefaced lie. Damn it all, darling, I am the servant of Justice.’

She was staring at him wide-eyed. ‘But didn’t you do it. Anthony?’

‘Of course I didn’t. He shot himself. I saw him. He thought it was the police come for the second time when I rang the bell and didn’t give them a chance to take him alive.’

‘And I thought I’d dragged you down to my level, and I would have died myself rather than that. It’s always been my terror that one day you’d have to pay again for us both. But who else would believe the truth, except me?’

‘They won’t be asked,’ returned Anthony, coolly. ‘Suicide will be the verdict. My namesake, Mr Hope, observes somewhere that it doesn’t do to be quixotic, and that to tell the truth to people who’ll only misunderstand it is in a sense promoting falsehood.’

‘I’m not a bit surprised you’re such a successful lawyer,’ exclaimed Janet. ‘You can make improbability logical.’

‘Whereas,’ continued Anthony, ‘if you do a little adapting you may strike the perfect balance. And no one,’ he wound up, his spirits rising momentarily, ‘to my knowledge has improved on that.’

He laughed triumphantly and lifted his stick to a passing taxi.

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ANTHONY GILBERT

‘Anthony Gilbert’ was the pen-name of Lucy Beatrice Malleson (1899–1973). Named after her paternal grandmother, Lucy Malleson wanted to be a writer from the age of fourteen. In addition to over sixty full-length detective mysteries, many short stories and several radio plays as ‘Anthony Gilbert’, she also wrote verse and fiction under her own name and various other pseudonyms. The best known of these is ‘Anne Meredith’, under which name—curiously—Malleson published an autobiographical memoir, *Three-A-Penny* (1940). As ‘Meredith’ she also wrote several novels, but as there were *two* writers called Anne Meredith active in the 1940s and ’50s, titles attributed to Malleson are sometimes the work of the other author, who died in 1960.

Lucy Malleson was born in the London suburb of Upper Norwood and she attended St Paul’s Girls School. After leaving school and while holding down a job as a shorthand typist, she began to sell verse. Her earliest published work is a poem, ‘Good Night’, published under her own name in *Poetry of Today* in 1919. Malleson’s jaunty and evocative poems were well regarded; they include ‘The Gossip’, which appeared in *Punch* in 1925, and, in the same year, ‘The Town Wind’, which won a poetry competition in *The Bookman*. The latter had been submitted under the name of ‘J. Kilmeny Keith’, a pseudonym that Malleson also used for her first book. She would later recount how her career as a crime writer had been inspired by John Willard’s celebrated ‘old dark house mystery’ *The Cat and the Canary* (1922), whose influence can certainly be detected in *The Man Who Was London* (1925). In this melodramatic thriller a financier is found stabbed to death in his library, the only clue being a business card bearing the inscription ‘Nemesis-London’. The novel received mixed reviews, with several criticising the author for involving too many characters who were

difficult to distinguish; one reviewer suggested that, with its anti-big business theme, the novel would appeal to terrorists.

Gilbert's second novel was a melodramatic affair entitled *The Sword of Harlequin* (1927), which told the story of two sisters, Rhoda and Judith Kennedy, and their selfish mother. This marked the final appearance of 'J. Kilmeny Keith' and Malleson next disguised herself as 'Anthony Gilbert', which would become her main pen-name. As 'Gilbert' she published several lightly criminous serials, including 'A Seeker After Romance' for *The Sketch* in 1927, and 'The Cavalier of Fleet Street' for *Twenty Story Magazine* the following year. She also wrote several short detective stories for a range of publications including *The Graphic* and *Eve*, and in 1927 her first 'Gilbert' novel *The Tragedy at Freyne* was serialized under the title *The Woman in Black*. It featured Scott Egerton, amateur detective and politician who would go on to appear in ten novels, including *The Body on the Beam* (1932), in which he bests Inspector Field, a police detective about whom Malleson wrote a series of entertaining short stories and 'Blue Murder', a novella featuring an impossible crime. Malleson had adopted a male *nom de plume* in the expectation that this would help sales. However, when *The Tragedy at Freyne* did indeed meet with success, her publisher received requests for photographs of the author. Malleson obliged. She cut her hair, donned a false beard and was photographed in men's clothes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the disguise was not convincing and 'Anthony Gilbert' was openly identified as Malleson in the press by the early 1930s. Nevertheless, her heroic failure might have inspired one element of the plot of *Speedy Death* (1929), the first crime novel by Gladys Mitchell who, like Malleson, would become a member of the illustrious Detection Club.

Although her crime fiction sold well, Malleson ached to be recognised as a non-genre novelist and she therefore adopted more pseudonyms. She wrote four melodramas as 'Sybil Denys Hooke' and two as 'Lucy Egerton': the light-hearted thriller *Lady at Large* (1936) and, closer to home, *Courage in Gold* (1938), which centres on a woman with a fanatical devotion to the theatre and a thwarted love. In fact, Malleson never married, spending much of her young life caring for her father with her 'best friend', an Aberdeen terrier called Sam. The most successful of her pseudonymous novels is *Portrait of a Murderer* (1931), published as by 'Anne Meredith'. Because the guilty party is identified after only 75 pages, the novel is sometimes described as an inverted detective story and, as with the novels

of ‘Francis Iles’ (Anthony Berkeley Cox)—the first of which first came out in the same year—the focus is psychological rather than detection.

As none of her straight novels landed particularly strongly with the public or critics, Malleson decided to concentrate on crime fiction. In a forty-year career, she built a reputation for witty, sometimes sordid metropolitan mysteries, several of which were filmed, including *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945), a classic of gothic suspense. Though the character was omitted from the film, the novel on which it was based—*The Woman in Red* (1941)—featured Malleson’s best-known detective, the bumptious, beer-swilling solicitor Arthur Crook, whom she claimed to have created ‘as a sort of protest against the erudition and culture of the Lord Peter Wimseys’ of Dorothy L. Sayers and other writers. Described by one contemporary critic as ‘delightfully vulgar’ and by another as a ‘human bloodhound’, Crook’s specialty is demolishing an apparently watertight case to the irritation of the police and the delight of his clients. Crook appears in fifty books, the last of which appeared posthumously in 1974. They include the sinister domestic killings of *Is She Dead Too?* (1955), *Knock, Knock, Who’s There* (1964)—a story of blackmail largely set in a Thames-side public house—and *Death Knocks Three Times* (1949), in which Crook investigates the murder of an eccentric colonel, possibly by his nephew; ungrateful relatives, like strong female characters, blackmail and homicidal spouses, were something of a staple of Malleson’s work.

‘The Whole Truth’ is the only shorter fiction written by Lucy Malleson as ‘Anne Meredith’. It was first serialised in the *News Chronicle* between 4 and 8 March 1935.

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A PIECE OF CAKE

Christianna Brand

‘Father, you’re *not*!’ said Paula.

‘Over my dead body!’ said Ben.

‘Over our mother’s dead body!’ said Sally.

He looked wretchedly round the lovely room. ‘Well—naturally I wanted to talk it over with you first.’

‘What did you think we’d say? “Oh, yes, Father, do go ahead, do marry again! After all, Mother’s been dead all of six months …”’

‘It doesn’t feel like six months to me,’ he said. ‘More like six years. It’s the—nothingness.’ He looked very grey and weary but he summoned up a faint little smile. ‘Do you know, it sounds ridiculous, but one of the things I miss most is not having a bit of cake around. She loved cake-making, didn’t she? It was one of the things she still enjoyed. Whenever you wanted it, you could always forage about and find yourself a bit of cake.’

‘For God’s sake—cake! Surely you can buy yourself a cake if you want one?’

He looked back in despair at the young relentless faces. ‘I’m only trying to explain. It’s the being alone. Try to understand—it’s the little things, yes, like the cake and one’s clothes being in such a muddle, and that woman standing there and saying “What’ll I do next?” and not being able to think of anything to tell her. But of course it’s much worse than that. No one to talk to, no one to discuss things with …’

‘Much notice you took of Mother when she *was* here to discuss things with, as you call it …’

‘Well, perhaps not—not latterly,’ he said. ‘They weren’t easy, you know—not these last few years. There was much more to it than you think. But we were still together, we still had common interests.’

‘What interests, for example?’ said Ben in his brutal young way.

‘Well—I don’t know. Things we still shared, the house, stupid things like meals and things, this room—she’d made this room so beautiful, hadn’t she? We both loved it, each in our own fashion.’

‘And now you want to bring that woman here to invade it, take possession of it. I won’t let you, none of us will let you,’ said Sally, passionately. ‘All Mother’s lovely things—’

‘You can have the things, share them out between you; she’d be happy with that. I can find other things.’

‘Break up the room, have it all different—’

‘I can’t win, can I?’ he said sadly. ‘Either way.’

‘You can win by giving up this disgusting idea and just staying like you are. If you’re so lonely, why don’t you see more of all of *us*? Or we’ll come home more, perhaps we’ve neglected you—’

‘It isn’t only that, Paula, is it? You have your own lives, you don’t want me around.’

‘Yes, we do, Father, that’s just a lot of self-pity.’

‘Then why have you, what you call neglected me? Not that I’m complaining, of course you can’t share your lives with me—for that matter, I can’t share mine with yours. We’re different generations.’

‘Good heavens, you talk as if you’re our grandfather! You’re only fifty-two.’

He rose and went to the window, staring out at the garden, cold and sodden in the pouring rain. ‘Yes, well—that’s part of it too, isn’t it? I’m fifty-two. You, Ben, you’re a man now—’

‘Oh, if that’s all it is then—why don’t you just keep her on as your mistress?’

‘She is not my mistress.’

‘Oh, Father, come off it! She’s been your mistress for the past three years, we’ve all known it.’

‘No, she hasn’t,’ he said. ‘She was—a friend. Your mother knew that, your mother didn’t mind my knowing her.’

‘Didn’t mind? So why did she three times try to commit suicide? Three times! And succeeded in the end.’

‘But, my darling, that wasn’t on my account. It all came out, didn’t it? In the coroner’s court. She was becoming more and more unbalanced—’

‘And who unbalanced her? You and this horrible Albertine of yours.’

‘It began long before I ever met Albertine Grey. It was what made me turn to her, in fact.’

‘Ah, so you admit—’

‘We were not having an affair, Sally. I did become very close friends with her, perhaps I was in love with her only I tried not to let myself be. Once I was free, I didn’t try any more and now—yes, I am.’

‘Once you were free. Of our mother!’

‘Darling, be a little merciful! I’m only trying to explain. Your mother was ill when Sally was born, after that I don’t think she ever really got well again. All these years she had these depressions, she got more and more—neurotic, whatever you like to call it—’

‘We like to call it unhappy.’

‘Well, all right, unhappy. But there was nothing to be unhappy about and if you’re unhappy for no reason, well, that’s being neurotic. And if you’re neurotically unhappy, other people are unhappy too. You make them unhappy. I met Mrs Grey, she was unhappy too, in the throes of a divorce, we were at a party, we just talked and talked. Then I ran into her again and then I had a particularly bad time and I was so desperate that on an impulse I rang up and asked if I could go and see her. So it grew up. There was nothing wrong in it; in fact from your mother’s point of view it was even an advantage because it gave me the patience and courage to go on.’

‘Patience and courage to go on—with our mother.’

He turned away from the mournful window, came back to his chair, struggled to explain. ‘You see, darling—you can’t know what it was like. None of you can know. You didn’t see it, you were all away, starting new jobs, setting up on your own you never saw her as she really was, underneath. When you came home on visits, she’d be happy and excited, but that wasn’t her usual self. I tried to keep it from you—why should you children be miserable too? So I stuck it all alone—the tears and the scenes and the so-called attempted suicides.’ He was terribly pale, remembering back, a chill line of sweat broke out along the hair-line, he looked suddenly old. ‘Three times, you say: half a dozen times more, that you’ve never known about, a dozen if you count in all the threats, the half-attempts, the fakes, the scares. You never knew about those, you never knew anything till I told you, before it came out in court, nobody knows the half of it, even now.’

‘*We* saw nothing—’

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘You were children—and anyway it was gradual, it got worse more rapidly in the past year or two and by then you’d all left home. The nights! The nights and nights I’ve sat up watching over her, with the day’s work in front of me when the morning came—watching her, talking to her, physically struggling with her … All the lying and pretending, leading a whole false life so that, for her sake, nobody should know …’

They were shocked out of their complacency, rather frightened, but they would not let go. ‘Nobody but dear Albertine? Everything was spilled out to her, you bet, all this—stuff about Mama.’

‘I had to have somebody to talk to; and somebody your mother didn’t know, someone who lived right away from her, was best. And if it helped me, well, I’ve told you—at second hand, it was helping your mother too.’

‘Perhaps she’d have preferred to be helped some other way—not to have her husband running off spilling all her private affairs to another woman.’

‘She didn’t know that I—told anything about her. She knew that I always kept her secrets safe. And she didn’t mind my knowing Albertine, I’ve told you. I think she was quite pleased. When she was—well, in her happier moments, she realised that life was not too easy for me.’

‘She couldn’t know that the minute she was out of the way, you’d rush off and marry the dear lady.’

He said patiently, ‘That’s one way of putting it.’

‘And what do you suppose people are going to think? Her ashes not yet cold in their rotten casket—’

‘Oh, Sally darling, I know you grieve,’ he said.

‘—and you come marching home with your new light of love. Six months after your wife committed suicide.’

‘They’ll probably say that she didn’t commit suicide. They’ll say he murdered her.’

‘Oh, Ben!’ he said, crying out in agony. ‘For God’s sake!’

‘Yes, well—you being in love with another woman and Mother dying like that—’

‘Shut up, Ben, that’s going too far,’ said Paula. ‘That’s rotten. Everyone knows how she died, she practically told the cleaning woman, only of course the old girl didn’t realise she meant she was going to take an overdose. And Father wasn’t even in the house, he found her dead when he came home.’

‘I’m only saying what people will *say*.’

‘They could, Papa, you know. People talking gossip don’t worry about the facts.’

‘Charming that will be for *us*,’ said Paula. ‘Won’t it?’

‘And for our charming new stepmother. Have you thought about that, Papa?’

No, he had not thought about it. Out of all his agonies, this aspect had never struck him. He said feebly, ‘I suppose I could wait.’

‘I thought that was just what you couldn’t do? How long are you going to wait for? Two years will still be too soon.’

‘Two years! he said. He was hungry for her loving and comforting, it was so long, so long since a woman had been kind to him. And meanwhile—something Puritan within him, something which he himself did not recognise as a sort of—chivalry—kept him from asking her to become his mistress, at least until he could promise her a future marriage. And after all, that wasn’t the answer. He needed so much more than that—a wife, a companion, a home. ‘Two years?’

‘Can’t you wait a couple of years for your piece of cake?’

‘And you needn’t think *this* is going to be a piece of cake,’ said Paula, and her young face took on an obstinate, almost a vicious look. She’s in pain, her father thought, she was so heart-broken when her mother died, at the way she died—they were all so heart-broken and shocked. And they’re young and—rough. They couldn’t understand. ‘You don’t understand,’ he said.

‘Well, *you’d* better understand—because we’re not having that woman here, are we, Sally? Are we, Ben? From the day she enters this house, I’ll never speak to you again. None of us will ever speak to you again.’

‘You’d lose us, Father. Of course if you prefer this woman to your own family—’

‘It’s for your own good, Father. To save you.’

‘Because, what sort of a life would you have, living here? All the people who’ve known you all their lives, know all the family before you—thinking so much of you, thinking so much of Mother—talking behind your back, whispering discovering that six months after your wife’s suicide you’d brought this divorced woman back to Mother’s home, our home. Just divorced when you met her, they’ll say it was on your account that she was divorced—’

‘That’s not true.’

‘They’ll think it’s true. We won’t let you do it, it’s for your own sake. And when they realise that now none of your children are on speaking terms with you—well, you couldn’t live with it. And neither could she.’

He could go away: take her away, somewhere, live abroad. But her roots were here in England, her children were here, settled in schools near by, she would not leave them. And his own roots also were here, even more straitly confined, in this old family house. Besides—to lose his children! They were cruel now, but only because they couldn’t understand, couldn’t see beyond their own reactions: could see, perhaps more clearly than he, the perils ahead. Were cruel to be kind.

Sally was pleading. ‘Father, we’d help you, we’d support you. We’d come and see you much more, we’ve been rotten not to. And you can come and see us—when we all get married and have homes, you can stay with us; some day or other we’ll be providing you with grandchildren—’

‘Sally and I will take cookery lessons, Papa, and see that you always have lots of cake.’

‘*But if that woman …*’

He sat for a long time, after they were gone. The years stretched ahead of him, lonely, loveless, no one to be interested, no one to care; no one ever to lie holding him close in her arms. Nothing to do, nothing to do. All the long years and years of nothing to do. Now, for the rest of the evening, with the darkness closing in—nothing to do. Nothing to do, all over the eternal weekend. Go and see her? But no, it was all no good. If the children could have stood by him, gossip might have flared a little, but would have died. Without them … He couldn’t subject her to that.

Compassion, that was the word. Compassion was what the whole world must turn on, mutual compassion, it was all that could get you through life. But—they had had no compassion for him, So now there was something that he might as well do because there was nothing left for him and it would be—an easement. They would suffer, but he in his turn need have no compassion for them. It would be, he thought bitterly, almost a sort of revenge. *She* wouldn’t suffer—nobody knew about her, and the children would now surely keep their mouths shut, not make everything even worse …

Compassion. Had it been out of compassion that he had done what he'd done? He had truly believed it then. Compassion for the poor, sick, tormented creature, fortifying her death-wish by the cunning, secret accumulation of otherwise harmless pills. But had it not rather, now that he faced the fact, been for himself?—worn out, weary, broken-hearted, fighting against that longing to love and be loved again. Well, if that were the secret truth—much good it had done him! If the children had been kind, in other arms he might have found forgetfulness and peace. But the children had not been kind.

Hardly knowing what he did, he rambled out into the kitchen and cut himself a slice of shop-made cake and, still eating it, went back to the telephone and dialled a number. What did that make one?—what crime had one committed?—finding a suicide in the last moments of life, turning away and leaving her to die. Doing nothing to help and save. Just turning away.

'Police? Would you come for me, please?' He gave his name and address and, as though he brushed away guilt, flicked fretfully at the cake-crumbs down the front of his waistcoat. Quack-quack-quack went the voice at the other end of the line, questioning. He said as though surely it must be sufficiently obvious, 'Well, I want to confess to having murdered my wife.'

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CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Mary Lewis, née Milne, was born in Malaya in 1907, the daughter of a tea planter. She wrote under the pen-names Mary Brand, Mary Roland, Mary Ann Ashe, China Thompson, Annabel Jones and, the one as which she is best known, Christianna Brand, which joined her mother's first name to her grandmother's maiden name. After several happy years at school at a convent in Berkshire, Brand was told she would have to leave by her father, who had been declared bankrupt. At the age of seventeen, she found herself 'literally penniless' and with no training whatsoever for earning her own livelihood. She moved to London where, known by her friends as 'Quif', she drifted from one job to another, eventually becoming a dance hostess (which, incidentally, was not a euphemism for something less respectable). This inspired her earliest published short story, a light romance entitled 'Dance Hostess' (1939), and it led to her meeting her husband, a surgeon called Roland Lewis. The couple married in 1936 and, when the Second World War broke out, Roland Lewis joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted overseas.

On her own in London, Mary Lewis moved in and out of a variety of jobs, eventually taking on a role that was to change her life—she became a shop assistant. While she was not a great success in the job, the job led to a great success for her because she detested the manager of the shop so much that she decided to kill her … in a novel. The hate-fuelled result, *Death in High Heels* (1941), is set in a high-class Mayfair couturier, drawing on another of Mary's many early jobs. There is a poisoning and the detective is the brash young Inspector Charlesworth, who also appears in the as-yet unpublished novella *The Dead Hold Fast*. With the return of her husband to England, Mary Lewis settled down with the intention of writing for the rest of her life. Her second novel, *Heads You Lose* (1941), won the $1,000 Red Badge prize offered by publishers Dodd, Mead & Co. for the best mystery

of the year, but it was her third book, *Green for Danger* (1944), that made her a household name, not least because of the film version, which was released in 1946 and starred Alastair Sim as her best-known detective, Inspector Cockrill. That same year, she was elected to the Detection Club, and she continued to write books of various kinds under various names.

By the late 1950s, Mary Lewis was recognised as a leading name in the crime and detective genre. Sadly, and for private reasons, she decided to give up writing mystery novels. However, she could not abandon writing altogether and, as well as a few newspaper serials and some short stories for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, she wrote a series of 'true life' novellas for *Woman* and several short books for children featuring Nurse Matilda, a character based on her own nanny. And then, twenty years since his last case, Inspector Charlesworth returned, in *The Rose in Darkness* (1979), a strange, almost dream-like book, in which a reclusive actress and her small group of friends are caught up in what appears to be murder. The return was very warmly welcomed by critics and readers alike but Mary Lewis had been suffering from a painful illness for some years. At the time of her death, on 11 March 1988, she was working on another detective story, 'Musth', which would feature Inspector Cockrill. However, it was never finished.

'A Piece of Cake' was first published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in January 1983.

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THE MYSTERY MAN OF SOHO

Margery Allingham

1

PARKER MAKES AN ARREST

‘There he is. Funny-looking chap, isn’t he? You wouldn’t think a man with a face like that could get away with half a million.’

Detective-sergeant Richardson spoke softly and without turning his head, and the inconspicuous raincoated figure at his side grinned almost imperceptibly

‘You wouldn’t think he could count to half a million, by the look of him,’ Sergeant Murdoch observed.

‘Probably can’t,’ said Richardson dryly, and the two minions of the Yard remained standing where they were on the quay, watching the stream of passengers hurrying down the gangway from the Channel steamer.

The man whom they watched so intently moved slowly away from the boat, almost as though he were loath to set foot on English ground.

He was a strange-looking man, approaching sixty, heavily built and small-eyed. He was well dressed, but his clothes sagged upon him, indicating suddenly lost weight. There was a stoop about his shoulders also, and a certain furtiveness in his glance.

This was Joseph Thurtle, the man who three months before had been at the head of one of America’s biggest cotton combines. The spectacular crash of the company and the subsequent revelation of its affairs had turned Mr Thurtle from a millionaire to a hunted fugitive.

The sensational story of his escape from the States with at least half a million sterling in negotiable securities had made newspaper history. Extradition warrants had followed him from country to country. He had fled from France to Italy, from Italy to Greece, from Greece to North Africa, but

everywhere the bar had been placed against him, and now, as he set foot in England, he did so with the knowledge that the finest police system in the world must have prepared a suitable reception for him.

As he stepped off the boat he looked behind him sharply. It was quite evident to the two men who watched that he expected a hand upon his shoulder at any moment.

‘Come on. We’ll follow him through the Customs.’

Richardson spoke softly, and added, a flicker of disgust passing across his red face:

‘I don’t like this method of Parker’s. Why not arrest the man right away and put him out of his misery? This waiting for him at Victoria, so that he can have a snappy arrest with the Press standing round admiring is a bit cheap, to my mind.’

‘Detective Inspector Parker,’ said Murdoch, ‘is a bit cheap. You and I have been on this job for ten years, and I was thinking, have you ever heard of or known a fellow with Parker’s reputation at the Yard? He’s an unpopular publicity hound. Come on! We must do our job, I suppose. We’ll keep an eye on this poor devil until he gets out of the train at Victoria feeling perfectly safe and walks straight into the arms of the unpleasant Parker and a battery of cameras.’

They sauntered into the crowd, and, with the ease of long practice, edged their way through the jostling groups of passengers until they walked directly behind the man they shadowed.

There were many friends and relations awaiting passengers on Folkestone Harbour Station, but there was one young man among the throng who served in neither capacity. He was a shortish, round-faced, fair-haired individual with a foolish expression and rather blank, trusting blue eyes.

He observed Joseph Thurtle and sauntered forward casually as the man came hurrying down the platform.

When he was within a few feet of the financier, however, he caught sight of the inconspicuous raincoated officials walking behind him. He hurried past the man and climbed into an empty compartment.

To all outward appearances there had been nothing odd in his behaviour, and yet in that brief instant quite an important person in the underworld of Europe had abandoned one plan and embarked upon another.

The fair young man settled himself in a corner of his first-class compartment, turned up the collar of his immaculately cut greatcoat, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and prepared to go to sleep.

Mr Joseph Thurtle, with his attendant spirits, settled himself in another compartment further down the train. It was cold. The station looked damp and unattractive, and as the train steamed through the chalky tunnels on the upward run, some of the dank hopelessness of the day seemed to permeate the consciousness of every traveller.

Thurtle was afraid. He was also puzzled. He had felt that this landing in England was tantamount to handing himself over to the police, and coming over in the boat he had steeled himself to face an arrest upon the quay.

It had not come. He could not understand it.

He leant further back into the cushions and peered out at the sodden landscape with weary, anxious eyes. He had played a dangerous game and he had lost. He wondered idly if life in prison was as bad or worse than current reports would have it.

The innocent old lady sitting opposite him thought he looked very tired, and wondered if he had found the crossing as trying as she had done.

Meanwhile, on Victoria Station, Inspector Parker, that rarity, an unpopular member of the C.I.D., strode up and down the platform, his fingers caressing the handcuffs in his coat pocket.

This situation he enjoyed. He was like that. His career had been one long line of rather unsavoury little triumphs which had forced him slowly to his present position. His reputation for minding other people’s business had earned him the somewhat obvious soubriquet of ‘Nosey’, and his narrow, grey eyes and sharp and sometimes brutal tongue had done the rest.

There were two or three cameramen outside the station, and he was looking forward to a photograph of himself in the evening papers handcuffed to the celebrated absconding financier. It was against the rules, he knew. The superintendent might even comment upon it unfavourably. But Inspector Parker privately considered that it would be worth it.

As he waited for the train he amused himself by imagining suitable captions beneath the picture.

‘Detective Inspector Roland Parker arresting Joseph Thurtle at Victoria Station this afternoon!’—and the like.

Parker was pleased with himself. Soon after he had received Richardson’s phone message from Folkestone to say that Thurtle had

boarded the train, he had hurried down to the station, and had incurred the totally unnecessary expense of keeping a taxi-cab waiting outside the station, so that he might walk straight into it with his charge.

As soon as the train was signalled, he retired outside the ticket barrier and stood waiting for his man.

The train came in, and immediately the partially deserted platform sprang to life, as carriage doors swung open and weary and excited travellers swarmed out, clamoured for their luggage, lost their children, and rushed aimlessly to and fro in the manner of their kind.

Richardson reached the barrier first.

‘He’s just coming, sir,’ he said. ‘You can’t miss him. Black overcoat, check muffler, soft cloth travelling cap.’

‘All right, all right. You leave this to me, Richardson.’

Parker spoke testily, as though the man had been hindering him rather than giving him valuable information.

Richardson gave up his ticket and wandered over to the bookstall to wait for Murdoch. The faintly contemptuous expression which always came into his face after dealings with his chief was very apparent.

Thurtle came heavily down the platform towards the barrier. Most of the fire which had once made him such a dangerous force in the business world had long since died down. He was old, tired, and at the end of his tether.

Inspector Parker pounced upon him as he stepped through the barrier.

‘Joseph Thurtle,’ he said.

The man spun round, and as he faced his captor there was an expression in his eyes which was almost relief. It had come at last, then. The wearing uncertainty was over.

‘Yes,’ he said quickly. ‘Yes. You are a police officer, aren’t you? Very well. I’ll come with you, only don’t make a scene here!’

But Inspector Parker was a man who took an officious pride in his job. He recited the formula of arrest clearly and unnecessarily loudly, and then, producing his handcuffs, slipped one bracelet over the older man’s right wrist.

‘Surely that’s unnecessary? I said I’d come with you.’

The man who had shunned publicity all his life glanced nervously at the curious crowd which was already beginning to collect.

‘I’m sorry!’ The inspector spoke curtly. The other bracelet of the handcuff was attached to his own wrist now, and together they walked

across the platform, a small section of the crowd streaming after them.

On the top of the steps, in the archway to the station drive, Inspector Parker turned and paused for an instant to glance behind him, ostensibly to look for Murdoch. It was only for a moment, but it gave the photographers time.

A faint smile of satisfaction spread over the inspector's face, and he hurried over to the waiting taxi.

Had he been a little less pleased with himself, a little less self-conscious, it is conceivable that he might have noticed a single swift glance which passed between the driver of the cab and a plumpish, fair young man, who had come out of the station by another door, and who now stood watching the departing taxi, an indescribable expression in his mild, childlike blue eyes.

It is also just possible that the inspector's sharp, well-trained glance might have observed that the driver, although remarkably like, was, indeed, not the actual man who had driven him from the Yard less than twenty minutes before.

2

SENSATIONAL DISAPPEARANCE

'I suppose you're taking me to Scotland Yard?'

The crumpled, dejected prisoner, who sagged against the leather upholstery of the cab, turned an inquiring eye upon the lean and wiry inspector at his side. Their two wrists, handcuffed together, lay upon the seat between them.

Inspector Parker vouchsafed no reply. Like many rather stupid men, he prided himself upon his taciturnity.

The cab was passing Westminster Abbey now, jolting and bumping along at an unusual speed for such a vehicle.

When they came out upon the Embankment the traffic thinned because of the wide road, and the cab gathered even more speed than before.

Inspector Parker sat up stiffly. His mind was far away, rehearsing just exactly what he would say to Superintendent Wetherby. The job had been so ridiculously simple that it was going to be difficult to introduce any element of self-congratulation.

He was still pondering on the problem when something occurred which materially altered the whole course of Inspector Parker's career and took his mind off the subject of what he was going to say to Superintendent Wetherby for ever.

A huge removal contractor's van stood by the side of the road, its doors gaping and its drawbridge-apron down. It was growing dusk, and, save for a tram and a few other cabs, the road was temporarily deserted.

The inspector was gazing through the glass with unseeing eyes, when the utterly incredible occurred. The cab driver slowed down, dropped into bottom, and, crouching low over his wheel, suddenly swerved and charged straight at the back of the pantechnicon.

There was a jolt as the front wheels hit the bottom of the apron, the engine roared as the cab took the strain, and the next instant they were plunged into darkness as the whole cab entered the van.

The doors clanged to behind them, and, as the inspector drew his gun, a figure swayed through the window towards him in the darkness and something hard and circular was pressed into his ribs.

'Sit quite still!'

The strange voice was calm, almost conversational.

'Don't start screaming the place down or I shall fire. The difference between a revolver shot and a lorry back-firing is negligible, you know.'

The inspector jerked the wrist of his prisoner.

'I suppose you think you're very clever, Thurtle,' he said. 'But this'll mean another ten years on your sentence.'

'I don't understand—' The man's voice was genuinely afraid. 'I can't move myself.'

It was at this point that the inspector realised that a second assailant was leaning through the other window of the cab.

Meanwhile, the van had begun to move. He could feel its rumbling wheels beneath him. The whole plot had been worked so smoothly and neatly that he realised that it was unlikely that anyone witnessing the incident would have guessed that anything was seriously wrong

It took Inspector Parker some moments to realise the enormity of the situation. Then he suddenly became angry. Only the gun muzzle in his ribs prevented him from becoming violent.

He was not a timid man, however, and he leant back against the cushions with at least a show of ease.

‘I suppose you realise the penalties for this sort of thing?’ he remarked sententiously.

The owner of the gun in his ribs laughed softly.

‘The trouble with you bobbies is that you believe you’re invulnerable,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t have handcuffed yourself to your prisoner, my son. As it is, I’m afraid you’ll have to come the whole way. And something tells me, Inspector Parker’—the voice was soft, almost caressing—’something tells me that you’re going to find that very unhealthy indeed.’

‘I don’t know who you are,’ said another voice out of the darkness, which the inspector recognised with a sudden shock as his prisoner’s. ‘But you’re doing me a great disservice. Why don’t you let this man arrest me in peace?’

Once again the soft, explosive laugh, which was beginning to grate on the inspector, sounded in his ear.

‘Good heavens!’ he said. ‘What do you think we are? A charity organisation? If you’ve come from the States, Mr Thurtle, you ought to know you’ve been hijacked. Perhaps you’d like me to translate for you, inspector? You’re one firm, as it were. Mr Thurtle is another. And the bright lads who are taking you on this joy-ride represent a third party who happens to be interested. Have you got that clear?’

The van swerved round a corner and gathered speed. In its depths, Inspector Parker leant back, the gun still in his ribs, and began to curse softly beneath his breath.

3

PARKER’S FATE

‘Well, Fisher, you see what you’re taking on. We found the taxi-cab. Fortunately, Murdoch was able to identify the number. And we’ve found the pantechnicon. What a nerve those fellows have! But the men, Thurtle and Parker, have vanished.’

The heavy, grey-haired man, who paced up and down the square carpet in the big, brightly-lit office, paused to glance at the young man at the desk with shrewd eyes, Chief Detective Inspector Guthrie, of the C Division, was at once the most liked and the most respected man of his rank. Even his

most ardent admirers admitted that he was hard, but there was no one who could call him unjust.

‘I am confident of you, Fisher,’ he went on. ‘We are all confident of you. But—well, this is your first big chance up here, and you know the old saying—“Nothing succeeds like success!” This is a serious business for us. When a world-famous criminal is arrested by an inspector on Victoria Station, and they both disappear, together with the taxi in which they are riding, kidnapped by an unknown gang, well, that sort of thing is asking for Press campaigns, questions in the House, and that sort of thing. I don’t mind telling you, Fisher, you’ve been given the job partly because of your record up North, and partly because you’re new to this district, and there’s a chance that the crooks won’t recognise you. But I don’t want to suggest that it’s going to be easy. It’s a very difficult proposition, Fisher, very difficult indeed.’

The young man at the desk looked up from the plan which all but covered it and grinned.

‘I feel it’s a tremendous opportunity, sir,’ he said, ‘and I appreciate it. I admit it looks pretty difficult at a first glance, but these things have a way of straightening themselves out, haven’t they?’

Guthrie smiled. He liked youth, he liked confidence, and he liked Detective Inspector Bob Fisher There were very few people who did not. The big, fair-haired officer, with the round face and unexpectedly sharp, grey eyes, was already a general favourite.

The third person in the room sat in a chair by the fire. At first glance he might easily have been taken for some stool pigeon who had called in to make a report. He was middle-aged, disgracefully untidy by comparison with the spruce, almost military precision of the other men’s clothes, and at the moment he was apparently half asleep. His face was red, his eyes watery, and he affected a really appalling quiff of grey-black hair which showed quite clearly the depression made by the dilapidated bowler hat he usually wore.

This was ‘Snoopy’—Snoopy Franklin. No one seemed ever to have heard his other name, and he was, perhaps, one of the most remarkable people employed by that most remarkable organisation in the world, Scotland Yard.

On official documents he was described vaguely as ‘information man’, and very few people would have liked to have defined his exact position

more definitely.

Snoopy provided information about London which could not be procured by the ordinary routine methods or through the usual channels; queer information, details of odd clauses in agreements between landlord and tenants, intimate gossip from the doss-houses, and the reasons for strange little discrepancies in crookdom's social scale.

For the rest, he had a limp, a wheeze, and he affected to be slightly deaf, which he was not.

At the moment he was stumped, and consequently extremely bad-tempered.

He glanced up and, after a preliminary snuffle, remarked, in his thick, unlovely voice:

'That WX15 district, where the boys found the cab, is a vortex—a thieves' vortex. They just stand there, and it swallows them up. It's happened time and again.'

'That's quite true,' said Guthrie. 'But if it swallowed them up completely it wouldn't matter so much, although I suppose we ought all to wish for Parker back. The exasperating thing about the WX15 vortex is that its prey comes up again—somewhere else.'

He walked across the room and stood looking over Fisher's shoulder.

'There you are,' he said, running his finger round an area marked in red on the large-scale plan. 'Here's Perry Street, Perry Square, Winton Street, and Winton Mews, and surrounding them one of the most important districts in London—Oxford Street, the beginning of the West End itself. Tottenham Court Road, Charlotte Street, Goodge Street. And in the centre is this silly little patch, apparently as innocent and blameless as the Bank of England—and yet that's the spot. If a crook gets to that spot he can disappear. Moreover, if a whole party of crooks, together with an absconding financier and one of our men, can drive there in a taxi-cab concealed in a pantechnicon, they can all disappear. It's ridiculous, isn't it?'

Fisher passed his fingers through his fair hair.

'I'd just like to make sure, sir, exactly what has been done already,' he ventured.

'Everything's there.' Guthrie pointed to a tremendous pile of manuscript on a side table. 'You'll find details there of everything that's been done in the past nine months, but I'd like to give you a brief resumé myself. I first noticed something odd about this particular district a little under a year ago.

A big jeweller's was held up in Oxford Street. To all appearances it was an ordinary smash-and-grab carried out with really clever teamwork. The two fellows who took most of the stuff went off in a car and were chased. They turned down St Francis Passage and got into Tottenham Court Road.'

He paused.

'The odd thing was, Fisher, that the raid took place at night. We had a cordon right round the district looking for the Hendridge kidnappers. It was after midnight, and every car was stopped. The whole district was alive with police. These smash-and-grab raiders were seen to abandon their car at the corner of Goodge Street and to turn into Perry Square. From that point they disappeared completely and utterly with their haul. Some of the stuff came back to us through the usual channels six months later.

'Now that, I expect, is not a very extraordinary story to you, and it wasn't to me at the time. I thought it was odd, and that some of our men had not been as smart as they might have been.

'But that was only the beginning. Since then, as you know, a peculiarly clever brand of smash-and-grab raid in the West End has been on the increase. The crooks have always used this method of escape, and the procession of incidents connected with the vortex finished triumphantly last night with this exasperating kidnapping.'

He paused and Snoopy grunted.

'We know,' he said. 'We've read the papers.'

Chief Detective Inspector Guthrie shot an irritated glance in the disreputable person's direction. No one but Snoopy would have thought of referring to the Press's attitude towards the fiasco of Thurtle's arrest to Guthrie's face.

'Yes, well, the Press is hysterical,' he said. 'There's someone with brains and a system in that racket, and someone who obviously knows all there is to know about WX15. It's got to stop, Fisher. That man, whoever he is, has got to be caught. And that district has got to be laid open. The rat-hole must be stopped. Take my advice and pin your faith to the WX15 district. That's where the solution of this mystery lies. What it amounts to is that we cannot surround WX15, and a certain section of the underworld know we can't. That's what's got to stop!'

'It's a vortex,' said Snoopy's throaty voice. 'Just like I told you.'

Guthrie turned to him irritably.

‘I wish you wouldn’t keep saying that,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t help, and it’s not a very apt simile. Things that disappear in vortexes don’t come up again.’

Snoopy snuffled.

‘As I see it, it’s a vortex,’ he said obstinately.

Bob Fisher bent low over the plan.

‘As I see it, sir,’ he ventured, ‘Winton Mews, where the taxi-cab and pantechnicon were found, seems to be the centre of interest. I see they’ve traced the owners, by the way. Both vehicles were stolen early yesterday morning. It’s rather odd that mews being built in the middle of a block like that, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t think so. The two sides that face on the square and Winton Street are modern. They consist of flats and tailors’ work-rooms. The other two sides are older and consist of the original houses to which the mews belonged in the old days. Some of these have shops on the ground floor. Then just across the road there’s another block of flats of rather better class, Southwold Mansions, I think they’re called, and by the side of them is a yard leading to an old warehouse.’

He bent over the other’s shoulder and indicated the buildings he mentioned on the plan.

Fisher nodded comprehendingly.

‘And all these places have been combed, I take it, previous to the—er—outrage yesterday and the discovery of the taxi-cab and the pantechnicon in the mews early this morning?’

‘Combed?’ Guthrie threw out his hand in an expressive gesture. ‘Ask Ames if you want to hear about that.’

‘I’ve combed it myself,’ said Snoopy, as though the matter were now settled.

He rose to his feet and came shambling and snuffling across the room till he, too, stood behind the desk.

‘Here you are,’ he said, running an extremely dirty forefinger round the two older sides of the block which housed the mews. ‘This is Joe’s café. Only done time once, Joe; very honest fellow. Reputed to put pea-flour in the coffee. That’s all that’s known against him. Next door there’s the laundry, man and his wife run it. Chinese blood there somewhere, but nice people. They let lodgings. We know all about them. The tobacconist’s next door is OK. So is the coal agency, and the general store has nothing to hide.

‘Now we come to the mews itself.’

His finger was leaving a grimy mark on the surface of the drawing-paper.

‘Only one fishy thing about this place—no lie-abouts. For some reason or other they don’t frequent it. Probably rats. Most of the garages are used by private owners, all respectable. We’ve gone over them and gone over them. There isn’t even a cellar under most of them.

‘Only two are used as dwellings. This one here on the corner is the wash-house of the laundry. Man and wife sleep above. There’s nothing there. Next door, of course, is old Mrs Wheeler. She’s a fine old London character. Says she’s a hundred and one next birthday. Bed-ridden, you know, and lives all alone except for charity folk who hover around her and the tourists who come and have a look at her.’

Guthrie smiled.

‘She’s quite a personage,’ he said. ‘Well-known people sent her telegrams last year when she reached her hundredth birthday, and the Press ran a story. We thought at one time that she might have done a little fortune-telling, but I don’t think so. Parker would have found out all about that—trust him.’

‘Anyway,’ said Snoopy, who was openly bored when anyone else was speaking, ‘there’s nothing in her place. There you are, you see.’

Fisher nodded. His handsome young face was grave and his shrewd eyes intelligent.

‘What’s underneath this district?’ he inquired.

‘I knew you’d ask that,’ said Snoopy in triumph. ‘I’ve got it all out for you. There’s the Underground, the 40Y sewer, and the old Post Office tube now used by the Westbridge Stores to join its two branches for parcels delivery, so they can avoid the traffic from the Oxford Circus shop. And you can run round that lot until you’re sick and tired, and a fat lot of good it’ll do you.’

‘What Snoopy means,’ said Guthrie, using the nickname before he could prevent himself, ‘is that there is no entrance, as far as we can see, to any of these underground ways from the WX15 district. Of course, things are made more difficult because Westbridge’s are inclined to be independent and don’t like police interest in their tube parcels system. But it’s the way in that’s important.’

‘That’s it,’ said Snoopy. ‘Find the entrance and you’ve found everything —including old “Nosey” Parker, I shouldn’t be surprised.’

‘You will certainly have found out a good deal,’ Guthrie agreed, ignoring the last part of Snoopy’s remark. But your present task is to recapture Thurtle—I don’t think his friends are in it, by the way; I think it’s private enterprise on the crooks’ part—rescue Parker, and lay hands upon the man—the man with the brains and the system.’

Snoopy raised one dusty eyebrow, and was about to speak, but before he could open his mouth the phone bell rang and the elder man lifted off the receiver.

‘Hallo, Fisher,’ he said. ‘This is for you. Sounds like a private call.’

There was just a tinge of disapproval in the last phrase, and Fisher took the instrument with a slight feeling of embarrassment.

‘Hallo—hallo, I say, can I speak to Bob Fisher? It’s really terribly important. I mean, I think there’s something going on here which he ought to know about. It’s no use arguing with me; I shall hang on until I get hold of him. And if you cut me off I shall come round to find him.’

The voice had a quality of weary insistence about it which was slightly comic, and which Bob Fisher recognised instantly.

‘Is that you, Box?’ he said.

‘Yes. I say, is that you, Bob?’

The voice had become animated.

‘Look here, old boy, I’m in a flat—a furnished flat. I’ve just taken it—not pinched it, you know—just rented it. It’s for my aunt, as a matter of fact. She’s coming up tomorrow, and I don’t think it’ll suit her. You come along and have a look at it, and I think you’ll agree with me.’

In spite of his exasperation Fisher smiled. The request was typical of George Box, that idle, impecunious soul whom he had met whilst on holiday earlier in the year, and whom he had knocked into several times since in the West End.

To Fisher’s more sober mind Box was one of those slightly comic individuals who are always rolling out of one ridiculous predicament into another. At the moment his appeal came at an awkward time, to say the least of it.

‘Look here, old man,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry. I can’t manage it. I’m frightfully busy. Yes, seriously. I can’t talk now, either. I’ll phone you later.’

‘But Bob, I say—’ The tone was aggrieved. ‘I’m putting something in your way. This is important. You come along. You’ll regret it all your life if you don’t. Listen, Bob!’ The voice was lowered mysteriously. ‘I can’t say

much over the phone, but I believe there's the seeds of a tremendous spree here.'

Fisher caught a fleeting glimpse of Guthrie's irritated expression, and he spoke severely into the mouthpiece.

'I'm sorry, Box. I'm busy,' he said. 'If you'll give me the address I'll see what I can do later.' He pulled a scribbling-pad towards him. 'Hallo, yes—3a, Southwold Mansions, Perry Street.'

He sat staring at the address he had scribbled down, and then turned and spoke into the phone with more interest than before.

'Did you say "Southwold"?'

'Yes; Southwold Mansions. You come along!'

'Right. I will. Good-bye!'

Fisher hung up the receiver, to find Guthrie looking down at him.

'That's a queer coincidence,' he said.

'Very odd,' agreed Fisher.

'ls your friend wealthy?' the older man said. 'Those are quite expensive flats. Dacre, the actor, has one. Quite a well-known surgeon lives on the first floor, and the others belong to people of that type.'

Fisher smiled.

'Box hasn't any money, but the aunt he's taken it for is quite wealthy. Interested in charities and that sort of thing. I think I may drop in there tonight.'

'I think I should,' Guthrie agreed. 'Hallo, Davidson, what's the matter?'

His last remark was addressed to the man who had just entered.

Davidson was a tall, gaunt individual of Guthrie's own age. He had one of the saddest faces and most genial spirits that were ever housed in one body.

At the moment, however, his naturally lugubrious expression was enhanced by genuine worry lines across his forehead and at the corners of his mouth.

He sauntered across the room and stood beside the desk, facing the others across its expanse.

'The country's very nice at this time of year,' he remarked unexpectedly. 'Damp, brown, covered with dead leaves, bonfires, and low mists. Very attractive. I like trees in winter, don't you?'

They stared at him in bewilderment, and he went on deliberately.

‘Fisher and I are just off to Epping,’ he went on, and added, as he caught sight of the plan on the desk: ‘that’s interesting. That’s the spot where they found the kidnapped cab, isn’t it? Poor old Parker! He’ll never under-tip another taxi-man.’

Guthrie’s rubicund face turned suddenly very pale.

‘D’you mean to say that Parker’s—been found, Davidson?’ he demanded.

The lugubrious man nodded solemnly.

‘A hole through his forehead and the back of his head blown out. Lying under an oak tree, partially covered with leaves. That’s why we’re off to Epping, Fisher. They say on the wire that he’s been dead some hours. Poor fellow, I never liked him.’

4

SUSPICIONS

‘Everything that was taken from the pockets is on this table, sir.’

The local police inspector in charge of the tiny police station on the outside edge of the forest regarded Fisher with respect.

Inspector Davidson and his younger colleague had just come in from a gruelling search of that part of the district where the body had been found. Their search had been fruitless, and, a little dejected, they had retired to the police station to inspect the body and examine the clothes.

Fisher stood looking down at the miscellaneous collection of articles which Inspector Parker had been wont to carry about him—his watch, his knife, a note-case, a packet of letters, several odd pencils, a tobacco pouch, and a dozen-and-one odds and ends.

Davidson joined him.

‘Nothing,’ he said gloomily. ‘Let’s go through the clothes!’

Together they examined the crumpled, blood-stained garments which had once clothed the perky, conceited little inspector. It was a melancholy business. Although Fisher had attended to such a task hundreds of times in his career, he could never rid himself of a sense of distaste for the job.

Suddenly an exclamation escaped him, and Davidson and the local inspector glanced up.

Fisher stood holding a tiny scrap of dirty paper which he had extracted from Parker's left shoe. He spread it out on the table in the charge-room and they bent over his shoulder.

The discovery was about three inches square, muddy, and clearly marked with the imprint of a heel. It was evidently a page torn from a pad of forms. There was a single line of printing below the perforated edge. 'Hotel Formby,' it ran. 'To be retained by owner.' And scribbled beneath in what appeared to be indelible pencil, were the three figures '178'.

Davidson frowned, and the local inspector looked puzzled.

'What do you make of that, Fisher?' Davidson spoke casually. 'In his shoe, was it? What is it? Some hotel shoe cleaning arrangement?'

Fisher shook his head.

'I don't think so. It looks like it at first, I admit. But why "to be retained by owner"? Have you ever stayed at a hotel where they gave you a receipt for your shoes?'

Davidson nodded.

'That's true,' he said. 'What do you make of it?'

Fisher considered.

'Well, first of all,' he said, 'I assume that it didn't get into the shoe by mistake. That is to say that someone put it there deliberately, probably Parker. Now it's just possible that Parker was in the habit of depositing things in the Hotel Formby's safe. But I don't think so, and, anyway, if he did, why carry the receipt about in his shoe? Also there's this muddy heel mark. That suggests that it has lain upon the floor at some time, and the theory I'm inclined to favour is that Parker was imprisoned somewhere, looked round for something that might give him a clue to his whereabouts, and picked this up off the floor. However, I think our next step is the Hotel Formby. You know it, don't you? It's in the Euston Road. A respectable middle-class establishment.'

Further examination of the dead man's belongings proving unproductive, the two Scotland Yard men climbed into Fisher's two-seater, and they set off for town.

As they went Davidson stated the facts of the case.

'Well,' he said, glancing at the rough notes he had made, 'I think it's perfectly clear that Parker was shot before they got him out to the forest. I should think there were certainly two men in it, if not more. Parker fought like a fiend, you know, and was very handy with his gun.'

‘I don’t think he was shot in cold blood,’ said Fisher, his eyes on the road.

‘What, you mean the angle of the bullet? Yes, I think perhaps you’re right. He was shot from some little distance. Probably trying to make a getaway, poor chap. I take it we proceed at once to the Formby Hotel?’

‘Oh, I think so!’ Fisher trod on the accelerator and the little car leapt forward through the gloom.

The manager of the Hotel Formby received them not without some trepidation. He was a plump little man, over middle age, with quick, dark eyes and a small black imperial. The arrival of two Yard men in his ultra-respectable establishment was an unprecedented event, and he eyed them nervously.

When they were comfortably ensconced in his small office, Fisher drew out his note-case and, extracting the grubby scrap of paper, handed it to the manager.

‘I wondered if you could tell me what that is, Mr Weller?’ he said.

The fastidious little man picked up the scrap of paper between a thumb and forefinger. At first he seemed inclined to doubt if such a disreputable item could ever have had anything to do with the elegant Hotel Formby, but upon examination a frown spread over his forehead.

‘Why, yes,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing extraordinary about this—or at least I hope not.

He shot an inquiring glance at the two inspectors, who remained completely wooden-faced and uncommunicative, waiting for him to continue.

‘Oh, yes, it’s perfectly simple,’ he repeated. ‘You see, since we are rather cramped for space here we have no garage belonging to the hotel. So in order to accommodate our guests, we have an arrangement with a big garage down the road whereby clients can leave their cars, but the charge is put through us and goes down on their bills in the ordinary way. Sometimes when that garage is overcrowded we patronise two or three other smaller establishments of the same sort in the vicinity, and when this is done we make a practice of giving the owner of the car a slip like this. The duplicate half is handed in to the garage. Without this ticket no one can obtain his car.’

‘I see. Then this is a garage ticket?’

Mr Weller deigned to glance at the offending scrap of paper once again.

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘A garage ticket belonging to a client who occupied room 178.’

A smile which he could only just hide flickered for an instant across Fisher’s face as he shot a covert glance at his companion. Inspector Davidson grinned openly.

‘Would it be possible,’ said Fisher gently, ‘would it be possible to find out exactly who was the owner of this slip? These figures are made of carbon, aren’t they? Probably you have the original slip still in your pad.’

With an exaggerated sigh of exasperation the manager of the Formby Hotel pressed a bell and summoned his secretary. In a few moments the pad lay on the table in front of the detectives.

Fisher turned over the leaves, and after a few moments’ anxious search, a grunt of satisfaction escaped him.

‘Here we are,’ he said. ‘Yes, this is it. And there’s a date, too—February the twelfth. Would it be possible, Mr Weller, to find out who occupied Room 178 on the night of February the twelfth?’

For an instant it seemed as though Mr Weller were about to expostulate, but long experience as a hotel keeper told him that it is wisest always to assist the police, who, while being the best friends in the world, can always turn to the worst enemies.

The booking clerk was summoned, and he came immediately, a pale, fair young man carrying a register. Within a few moments the identity of the mysterious owner of the garage ticket had been revealed.

‘Mr Richard Holt,’ said the booking clerk, looking up from the register with some surprise. ‘He’s one of our oldest and most regular customers.’

‘I’ve known Mr Holt for years,’ the manager agreed. He’s a manufacturer in Walsall, and always stays here on his trips to London,’

‘I’m afraid we must ask you for his address,’ said Fisher quietly, and added, turning to the booking clerk, ‘I don’t suppose you know anything about this ticket?’

The young man examined the slip of paper with more interest than his employer had done.

‘Yes, I think I do,’ he said. ‘I remember Mr Holt coming to me for garage accommodation rather late one evening. I phoned up our usual garage just down the road, but they were full. I remember I had to make other arrangements for him.’ Fisher was conscious of a thrill of satisfaction. Here, at last, was a witness who, while being obviously cautious and of an orderly

mind, was yet possessed of a good memory and a genuine desire to be helpful.

‘Could you tell me the name of the garage where the car was left?’

‘I’m not sure. It must have been one of three. We have a resident chauffeur who fetches the cars from the garages for their owners. He might remember.’

There was a pause while this individual was summoned, and Fisher took advantage of it by securing Mr Richard Holt’s home address.

The chauffeur proved to be a disappointment. He was a harassed, plainly overworked individual who, besides being a chauffeur, had the thankless job of odd man at the Formby.

He remembered Mr Holt’s car quite well.

‘It was a big Graham-Paige,’ he said. ‘Not a new model. I put it in one of the three garages we use when the big one’s full, but I couldn’t say which now. I was very rushed, and it’s some time ago now. They’d probably know there, though.’

‘I’ll give you the addresses, shall I?’ said the booking clerk helpfully, and while he jotted them down on a slip of paper for the detectives the manager turned to Fisher appealingly.

‘Naturally I don’t know what business you’re on, inspector,’ he said, ‘but Mr Holt is a very old client of ours, and you understand that I was naturally very loath to give you his address. If it would be possible for you to—er—discover what you have to without referring to him I should be tremendously obliged. Naturally we don’t like our clients to think that we give away their addresses.’

Fisher’s friendly disarming smile did much to reassure him, and presently the two detectives took their leave. They stood for a moment on the pavement before entering their little car. Fisher ran his eye down the list.

‘Burchell’s Garage, Albany Street; the Fairlop, Fitzroy Street; and Knapp’s, Grafton Street. That’s interesting, Davidson.’

The inspector met the younger man’s shrewd, grey eyes.

‘Grafton Street,’ he repeated softly.

Fisher climbed into his car and, turning on the dashboard light, drew a roughly-made plan from his coat pocket.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘this is the diagram of the underground ways in the WX15 district. Here’s the 40Y sewer, here’s the Underground railway, and here is the old Post Office tube now used by the stores. See what I mean?

This tube runs right through the area and comes out at Westbridge's other store in the Tottenham Court Road. On its way it runs beneath Grafton Street. I wonder? Anyway, let's go there first. And yet I don't know. Routine is routine, and the others are nearer. We'd better cover them on our way.'

Burchell's garage proved to be a comparatively large establishment in the charge of a very efficient ex-Service man who kept a careful record of every car he received from the Formby. He was so positive that no Graham-Paige had been housed by him on the night of February the twelfth that the inspectors were satisfied and moved on to the Fairlop.

Here, too, they were unsuccessful. The garage was smaller, but no less respectable, and they went on.

As they turned into Grafton Street and drove slowly down the narrow road looking for Knapp's, however, Fisher felt a thrill of exhilaration.

Knapp's garage was an old stable approached by a narrow bricked way between a second-hand shop and a dairy. It looked uninviting, dark, and none too prosperous. As they turned into the half-empty building a disreputable figure came out to meet them. He was small, rat-faced, and clad in garments which appeared to have been soaked in oil for many years. His one concession to smartness was a huge flat cap which he wore at a rakish angle.

He regarded them with the knowing eyes of one who has seen the police before and is not likely to forget them.

Fisher plunged straight into the business in hand.

'I'd like to speak to the manager, please.'

'I am the manager. And the perishin' proprietor, too. There's me name over the door—Thomas Knapp—and I'm not ashamed of it.'

'Remarkable,' said Fisher affably. 'Well, Mr Knapp, I am Inspector Fisher, of Scotland Yard.'

'I knew that before you told me,' said Mr Knapp truculently. 'I didn't think you was in fancy dress.

Fisher ignored the dig and went on.

'You sometimes garage cars for the Formby Hotel.'

'That's nothing to be ashamed of, I hope,' said the little man with dignity. 'Seems quite a nice 'otel. Sort of place I wouldn't mind stayin' at meself.'

Fisher, who had had some experience of this particular type, knew too much to resent the combative manner. He drew the scrap of paper from his

pocket and showed it to the garage proprietor, without, however, allowing it to leave his hand.

‘Ever seen that before?’

Mr Knapp sniffed noisily.

‘Might ’ave done,’ he said non-committally. ‘It’s the sort of thing anybody might ’ave seen before.’

‘Well, do you recognise what it is?’

‘Yus,’ said Mr Knapp, after a pause, which might have been the effort of tremendous mental concentration on his part, or mere caution. ‘It’s a ticket from the Formby for a motor-car.’

‘That’s right. Well, this ticket was given up in exchange for a Graham-Paige on February the twelfth last. Wilkinson, the chauffeur of the Formby, thinks he may have brought the car here.’

‘Very likely,’ said Mr Knapp with irritating vagueness.

‘Well, did he?’ said Davidson, breaking in. ‘Did you house a Graham-Paige from the Formby on the night of February the twelfth? And is that the ticket which was given up in exchange for it?’

Might ’ave been.’ There was no telling from the crafty expression of Mr Knapp’s unlovely face whether he was telling all he knew or whether the subject had ceased to interest him.

‘You have a good think, my lad.’ Fisher spoke sharply. ‘This is important. You know who we are. We don’t come round asking questions simply for fun.’

‘Reelly,’ said Mr Knapp with contempt. ‘Well, I’ll ’ave to think, then, won’t I?’

‘It wouldn’t be a bad idea.’

The two detectives waited with irritation while Mr Knapp performed this unusual feat.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘No, I don’t think I did. I wouldn’t be sure, of course, but I don’t think I did.’

Fisher’s eyes narrowed.

‘The car hasn’t been stolen,’ he said. ‘There’s no complaint about it. If it was here you needn’t be afraid to say so.’

‘Well, that’s a nice thing to suggest!’ said Knapp with sudden indignation. ‘I’m doin’ my best to ’elp you, aren’t I? I say I don’t think it was ’ere.’

‘Don’t you keep any records? How do you know what to charge the Formby?’

‘I don’t run up any accounts. It’s cash on the nail. I don’t say I don’t trust ’em, but I like to be on the safe side.’

Fisher did not speak immediately. His quick eyes were taking in every detail of the big, draughty garage, and he had just caught sight of something lying among the litter which strewed the unswept floor. He bent down and picked it up.

It was another ticket, save for the number similar to the one he held.

Mr Knapp grinned, but there was a shifty expression in his small, crafty eyes.

‘Lookin’ for clues?’ he inquired.

Fisher slipped the scrap of paper into his pocket-book beside the other.

‘Do you always keep your receipts on the floor?’ he inquired.

‘I can’t waste my time tidying up after customers,’ said Mr Knapp, nettled. ‘When a man I know gives me a receipt for a car ’e brought in the night before I let ’im ’ave it. And if the receipt falls on the floor I let it stay there. I don’t spend me life tidying up.’

‘So I see,’ said Fisher.

Mr Knapp hesitated.

‘Since you’re so interested in me business, would you like to ’ave a look round?’ he suggested. ‘I’ve got a nice little place ’ere. I know you ’tecs like to nose round a bit.’

He led them solemnly into the small office at the back of the garage and into the minute yard behind. The whole place was indescribably untidy and dirty, but although both Yard men were on the alert they saw nothing unexpected or unusual.

At the back of the garage there was a car pit of an ordinary type, but as a huge lorry stood over it at the moment Fisher did not consider it worthwhile investigating.

‘Me and me mother lives in the attic above,’ volunteered Mr Knapp confidentially. ‘I don’t keep any pets, and I’m fully insured in case of fire. Anything else you’d like to know while you’re about it? Just ask. Don’t mind me.’

‘Any cellars?’ said Fisher casually.

Mr Knapp, who had turned aside to look at a pressure gauge on the tyre of a limousine, bent a little lower over the disc, but when he spoke his voice

was as perky as ever.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Nothin’ but drains, and they’re not too good. Would you like to ’ave a look at the family album?’

This sarcasm was apparently lost on Davidson, but Fisher grinned.

‘We’ve got it all at the Yard, I expect,’ he said, and, nodding to the man, he went out to his car again.

‘Well, what do you think?’ said Davidson, as he climbed in beside him. ‘That man’s got a record, I expect, but he seems to be on the straight now.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Fisher slowly. ‘But I rather think I’ll have the place watched. We’ll see what Snoopy knows about it, too. Of course, we’ve got nothing to go on, but I’ve got a sort of hunch that Mr Knapp’s establishment is well worth keeping an eye on. We’ve got to get Thurtle back, Davidson, and we’ve got to get the man who shot Parker.’

‘Perhaps Thurtle shot Parker?’ suggested Davidson.

Fisher shook his head.

‘Not on your life,’ he said. ‘There’s a very different man behind all this. Thurtle took a big risk and came an almighty cropper, but this fellow takes risks all the time. But I’ll get him, Davidson. I’ll get him, if it’s the last thing I do.’

5

SINISTER HAPPENINGS

It was after midnight when Fisher at last found time to present himself before the door of No. 3a, Southwold Mansions. The lights in the neat, well-kept hall were lowered to half strength, but the bright green door looked expensive and inviting.

In response to his ring the door was opened perhaps three inches, and Box’s pink face appeared in the aperture.

‘Oh, hallo, you’ve come at last, have you?’ he said. ‘Come in. I was beginning to be afraid you’d back out of it altogether. Come on in and have a drink,’

He was in pyjamas and dressing-gown, and his diminutive figure had acquired a certain negligent charm from his costume. Box prided himself on his taste in clothing, and his green silk dressing-gown with white spots was luxurious, as he said himself, without being in any way vulgar. At the best

of times he was a slightly cherubic person with the engaging frankness of a child and the plastered bright yellow hair of a schoolboy.

Fisher followed him into the main room of the suite. It was a big, ornate apartment, very well furnished, if a little on the elaborate side, but at any rate extremely comfortable.

Box went over to the sideboard and mixed a drink for himself and his visitor, talking volubly the whole time.

‘I was afraid you hadn’t taken me seriously. I had great difficulty in getting on to you at that place. You bobbies ought to be always on the alert, you know; always eager to pick up a crumb or two of information which might lead you on to big things. Have a cigarette? That box is full of ’em. The man I rented this flat off seemed to want to make me comfortable. He’s left the whole place in running order.’

Fisher walked over to the window, and, sweeping aside the heavy satin curtains, stood looking down. Perry Street, with its sinister yard, lay directly beneath him. Opposite was the narrow alley which led into Winton Square, with its tiny shops, unsavoury mews, and curious reputation. Really, the view of WX15 from the window at which he stood was extraordinarily complete.

Fisher’s eyes glinted. He had made up his mind that he would wrest the secret from the district if it were the last thing he ever did.

He was interrupted in his thoughts by Box, who thrust a glass into his hand.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘what do you think of it? The flat, I mean. It looks perfectly sound at a first glance, doesn’t it? I mean, if you were looking for a furnished flat for your aunt, wouldn’t you say, as soon as you set foot in here, by George, the very place?’

Fisher, whose only aunt was an impecunious and elderly spinster with strong tee-total convictions, grinned in spite of himself.

‘I might,’ he conceded. ‘But seriously, old boy, if you’ve brought me up here simply to congratulate you or your house-hunting, you haven’t been very intelligent.’

‘Oh, but wait. I’m giving you a drink to steady you up.’ Box’s round face was momentarily serious. ‘There’s more to come. First of all, suppose you come in here?’

He conducted the other man into a bedroom which led off the main room in which they had been talking. It seemed a very ordinary room, a little too

elaborate for Fisher's own taste, but otherwise perfectly normal. Box was quivering with excitement, however.

'When I changed for dinner tonight,' he said, 'I dropped a stud, and I was crawling about on the floor to find it when I discovered this. Rather queer, isn't it?'

He lifted up the bed vallance, rolled back a rug-end, and pointed to a ring set in a floorboard.

'Now look,' he commanded.

He pulled it up and revealed a small square aperture in the floor which contained, to Fisher's astonishment, three revolvers.

Box rose to his feet, dusting his hands.

'There you are,' he said. 'That's the first exhibit. Apparently my landlord likes to be ready for burglars. At the first alarm he can hop out of bed and go to meet them, a gun in each hand and one in his teeth.

'An impressive first appearance, I should think.'

Fisher shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes were grave.

'May be just an idiosyncrasy,' he said. 'It certainly seems funny to leave them in a furnished flat.'

'Funny?' said his host. 'It's a laugh in itself. You wait. Our next port of call is the kitchen. Here we have a service lift.'

The little white-tiled kitchenette which they next visited had a wedge-shaped shaft built in across one corner, and in it was a small lift worked by ropes and unusually solid for such a contraption.

'This takes you right down to the back yard of the block,' he said. 'Interesting, isn't it? It goes through the flat below, of course, but it doesn't have an outlet there.'

'How do you know?' Fisher inquired.

'Because I've been to see. I've ridden up and down in that thing twice. You'd find it more difficult because you haven't got my elegant proportions, but I did it quite easily. Look!'

He climbed into the hatch and sat there cross-legged, smiling out at his visitor.

'There you are,' he said. 'These ropes work at a touch. Very different from the one at my people's house. There's a certain amount of work in that, I can tell you.'

He touched the rope at his side and moved himself up and down a few feet either way with extraordinary ease.

‘This isn’t all,’ he went on hastily. ‘See this?’ He stretched out his hand and touched a minute switch on the inside panelling of the lift shaft. Instantly they were in complete darkness. ‘See that?’ Box’s voice was triumphant in the darkness. ‘That turns out every light in the flat. And what’s more, you can’t turn them on again until this has been readjusted. You try!’

Using his torch, Fisher made the experiment. But it was not until the little switch had been put back that the flat was once more a blaze of light.

Box climbed out of the lift and stood beside his friend.

‘Well, you’re glad you came along, aren’t you?’ he said.

Fisher grinned down at him.

‘I am, certainly. You must have had a joyous evening playing with these gadgets. Any more?’

‘Only one that I know of.’ Box was as pleased as a child with a new toy. ‘Come and stand in the big room.’

They went back to the room Fisher had first seen, and Box indicated the fireplace. This was a tremendously ornate affair. The overmantel rose up to the ceiling and was made of lacquered wood ornamented with an inlay of mother-of-pearl. The fireplace itself was set further back in the wall, and there were small inglenooks built in on either side.

‘What do you think of that?’ Box demanded.

‘Hideous,’ said Bob frankly. ‘That decoration doesn’t go with that design.’

Box grinned.

‘Well, you stand and watch it, that’s all.’

He went out of the room, leaving the door open, and from where Fisher stood he could see his dressing-gowned figure pass down the corridor and unlock the front door, through which he disappeared.

‘Now,’ said his exuberant voice. ‘See the fireplace?’

Fisher glanced up, a startled expression in his eyes. Each mother-of-pearl bud and flower was glowing with a ruby light. The effect was pleasant and somehow startling.

Box came back highly delighted.

‘Did you notice it? Rather natty, isn’t it? I saw it first when the grocer’s boy came. It works very simply. Anybody standing on the door-mat forms a contact which produces the illumination. Rather a jolly little flat, isn’t it? Just the place for auntie.’

Fisher sat down in one of the deep armchairs before the fireplace.

‘Look here, Box,’ he said, ‘how did you get hold of this place? How long have you been here?’

‘I moved in about four o’clock this afternoon, and I took the flat off a most respectable agent at eleven o’clock this morning. Apparently his client had gone abroad on a film contract. He’s an actor. I forget the name. He left very suddenly and just threw the keys in at the agents and told them to let it. It’s very cheap, considering, and I snapped it up. Of course,’ he went on gravely, ‘I don’t know if I should have been so certain it was just what auntie wanted if I’d noticed all the parlour tricks, but I didn’t spot them until this evening. I rang up the agent, but he’d packed up for the night. Then, of course, I just had to have someone in to see my display, so I got on to you. Would you like the history of my life now? Or perhaps if we could think of a crowd we could ring up we might throw a party. It’s only about one o’clock. There must be a few people we know who haven’t gone to bed yet.’

Fisher did not respond immediately. His mind was taken up with the strange disclosures he had just witnessed. Of course, there was just a chance that these elaborate signals and precautions were the property of a burglar-shy householder alarmed by the recent increase in crime, but on mature consideration this seemed hardly likely.

Box broke in on his thoughts.

‘There’s another bedroom over there you can have,’ he said. ‘Or don’t the police ever sleep? I’m not a nervy man, you know, but there’s something about this place that definitely gives me the creeps. Do you notice it? There’s a sort of—how shall I say?—expectant atmosphere about. Something most extraordinary.’

Fisher did not answer. He opened his mouth to speak, but at that instant there came an interruption so remarkable that it brought both young men to their feet, their eyes starting. A prickly sensation ran down Fisher’s spine.

From the fireplace someone had spoken. The voice, or whatever it was, for it sounded hardly human, had the curious metallic, yet hollow quality of a bad loud-speaker, or the noise made by someone shouting over a telephone.

‘Put out the lights,’ it said. ‘Put out the lights. We’re coming up!’

The simple words touched a depth of elemental horror in that eerie flat. As Fisher stood there wrestling with an overwhelming sensation of dismay

the voice came again.

‘Put out the lights. We’re coming up!’

Fisher was the first to pull himself together. He sprang forwards into the wide, open fireplace and peered under the mantel. The explanation of the alarming phenomenon was instantly apparent. A disc covered with gauze was let into the underside of the lacquer work. It was a loud-speaker. The microphone to which it was connected was somewhere downstairs, no doubt in the yard of the block. This, then, was yet another of the many curious devices hidden in the flat.

Even as he watched the disc it spoke again.

‘Put out the lights. Hurry!’

Motioning Box to follow him, Fisher darted into the kitchen and pressed back the master switch. He had no doubt that there must be another such device more conveniently placed in the flat somewhere, but now was not the time to search for it.

Then, drawing his gun, he crept back into the main room again, keeping the unarmed Box well behind him, since there was no time to acquire a second gun from the store in the bedroom.

As they stood waiting in the darkness the silence became unbearable. There was very little traffic in the street outside and the whole place seemed to be holding its breath waiting for the unknown.

Suddenly Box gripped the detective’s arm, and Fisher, who had had his eyes fixed on the spot where he guessed the doorway must be, caught sight of the cherry branch picked out in crimson lights on the mantel. The warning was dramatic. Someone stood outside the gaily-painted green door.

After what seemed an age there was a faint click from down the passage, followed by a rustling. Fisher laid a restraining hand on Box’s arm. He was sufficiently experienced not to go leaping, into a fight single-handed without first discovering the odds against him.

The silence became unbearable. The darkness seemed full of strange forms, and yet there was hardly a sound, hardly a breath, to tell them whether they were alone or not.

It was the crimson warning over the fireplace flashing out again which was the first real indication of movement on the part of their extraordinary visitors. Three times the light flashed out, and then all was darkness again.

Fisher pulled out his torch and, keeping his gun levelled, swept it round the room. Nothing had been disturbed. They appeared to be alone.

Box stepped back into the kitchen, and a second later the lights once again shot up, blazing down upon the gilt and over-polished furniture, the luxurious hangings and deep-pile carpet.

It was Fisher who first caught sight of the object down the end of the corridor just inside the front door. With a smothered exclamation he darted forward, Box at his heels. When they were within six paces of it, they pulled up short, and the two young men stood staring at this newest and most remarkable of the surprises the flat had to offer.

Half-lying, half-seated upon a heavy hall chair which had been dragged out from the wall, her head thrown back, her eyes closed, and her slim hands and ankles bound with narrow cord, reclined quite one of the most beautiful girls either of them had ever had the good fortune to see in all their lives before.

Fisher bent over her.

‘Good heavens,’ he said, ‘this is a most extraordinary thing. Look here, you go and get her some water while I untie her.’

He turned his head as he spoke, and just for an instant he caught sight of an extraordinary expression on the other man’s face. Box’s cherubic countenance had become suddenly white, and in his blue eyes, which were usually so mild and childlike, there had crept something that was palpably fury.

Fisher only caught a fleeting impression, and the next instant it had passed from his mind as Box’s face regained its normal colour and blissful expression.

‘Oh, yes. Yes, quite. I think that’s a good idea. What a funny flat. I must tell the man tomorrow it won’t suit auntie. Strange women popping in like this, and that sort of thing. She doesn’t consider herself old-fashioned, but she wouldn’t like it. She’s funny that way.’

He trotted off to the kitchen while Fisher unbound the cord which fastened the girl’s wrists and ankles. She was really extraordinarily beautiful. Her red-brown hair, which curled under her little green hat, coiled against a white skin, and her heavy, dark lashes enhanced her pallor.

Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked at him. Her first expression was one of surprise, which quickly turned to sheer terror.

Before Fisher could speak, Box’s inconsequential voice echoed from the kitchenette.

‘Here, I say, Bob, half a minute! Come at once, will you?’

There was an urgent note in the tone, and Fisher turned instinctively to his friend.

He found Box hanging over the lift.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘Can’t you hear something?’

Fisher bent over the shaft.

‘There’s nothing there,’ he said at length. ‘What did you think you heard?’

‘Someone scream.’ Box had lowered his voice mysteriously, and the effect was somewhat comic.

Fisher was inclined to be irritated. That was the worst of Box, he reflected; a scatterbrained soul at the best of times.

He took a glass from the dresser and filled it under the tap.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget the girl. She can probably put us wise to the whole thing.’

But even as he entered the passage he heard a sound which brought a smothered curse to his lips. As soon as he came in sight of her empty chair he knew he was too late. The cords which had bound her lay on the floor and the front door hung wide.

He turned round and thrust the glass into Box’s hand.

‘Here, take this,’ he commanded.

Box stood in pyjamas and dressing-gown, the glass in his hand.

‘I say, where are you going?’ he shouted.

‘Here, wait for me!’

Fisher glanced at him over his shoulder as he reached the door.

‘I may just catch her,’ he said. ‘See you later.’

Box followed him to the doorway and stood on the mat, an absurd figure in pyjamas and dressing-gown. Then he frowned and, coming back slowly into the flat, shut the hall door behind him. For a moment he stood hesitating. Then he shrugged his shoulders and, placing the glass of water on the hall table, went back into the bedroom and began to dress at speed.

His movements during the next ten minutes were extraordinary, to say the least of it. He dressed in record time, and when he emerged from the bedroom, although his round face was still bland and good-humoured, a subtle difference had come over the expression in his eyes. They were no longer frank and childlike. Instead, a purposeful expression lingered in their depths, and a gleam of intelligence that was not altogether pleasant.

He went round the flat turning out the lights, and then, making his way to the kitchenette, entered the lift with the air of one long accustomed to do so, and lowered himself swiftly into the yard below.

The dark raincoat which covered his plump form rendered him inconspicuous, but it seemed a little odd that he should have taken the trouble to don thick wash-leather gloves before climbing into the lift.

When he emerged into the yard he stood for a moment looking about him. Then, convinced that he was unobserved, he sent the lift back into position, and, pulling his hat down over his eyes, he stepped softly across the concrete and entered what appeared to be an area leading to a coal cellar.

The place was empty and had evidently been built in the days when the whole block of flats was a private house.

The young man seemed to know his way, for he used no torch, although the building was in inky darkness. He crept softly round the wall, and finally, discovering the door he sought, passed through it into yet another cellar.

He came out of this into another area precisely similar to the one by which he had entered, and stepped up into the street in a narrow turning on the opposite side of the road from the block of flats.

He stood for a moment listening, but there were no unusual sounds above the roar of the distant traffic, and presently he set off down the narrow pavement and turned into Winton Mews.

The narrow, unsavoury court was quiet, and no gleam of light showed from the windows above the big garage doors.

Box stepped forward and, moving up to the third door on the left, knocked twice, once loudly and once softly.

Instantly it swung open, and he stepped into the darkness within.

6

UNDERGROUND

‘I wish you’d talk. You get on my nerves sitting there, Fishy Eyes!’

Mr Knapp stood at the end of the wooden table in the damp, ill-lit cellar and looked at the man who sat opposite, his head resting upon his clasped hands, a dull expression upon his drawn white face.

Joseph Thurtle had looked weary when he had stepped off the boat train at Victoria a little over twenty-four hours before, but in the interval he had become more haggard and white than would have seemed possible.

He took no notice of the garage proprietor's opening gambit, but continued to stare straight in front of him.

'Leave 'im alone, Thos, can't you?'

The speaker was a heavily-built, red-faced individual, who lay sprawled upon a pile of sacks spread out on a packing-case in the corner of the cellar.

'Leave 'im to the boss!'

The other two occupants of the apartment, who were cutting for halfpence on yet another packing-case, nodded their approval. One was a slender, dark young man with more breeding than strength in his face, and the other a splendidly proportioned, hardbitten-looking giant with three days' hair on his chin and the clear, smiling eyes of a sailor.

Mr Knapp sniffed, and wandered over to join the card players.

'I can't understand you, Jack,' he said, eyeing the dark young man. 'You sit here and play with Bill all day long. Don't you ever get tired of it?'

'Run away, Thos. You're interrupting!'

Jack Simmons' voice was unexpectedly well modulated.

'Bill and I have done enough work for today. We must do something. We don't get our fun as you do, tormenting the prisoner.'

'That's right.' The man addressed as Bill revealed a guttural Scandinavian accent. 'You go and worry Tim.' He indicated the big man in the corner.

'If he comes over here,' said that worthy with sudden violence, 'I'll break his skinny little neck.'

'All right. No offence, I 'ope!' Mr Knapp perched himself on the end of the table and considered Joseph Thurtle once again.

Suddenly a rumbling roar shook the room in which they sat, but none of the occupants so much us batted an eyelid. They were used to the tube trains which hurtled past within a few feet of them.

Joseph Thurtle stirred wearily where he sat, but the blank, helpless look did not vanish from his eyes

Suddenly there was the sound of a small electric bell, and instantly the little company in the room glanced up. Mr Knapp slipped off the table and stood respectfully to attention. A rough wooden door at the far end of the room swung open and a young man appeared.

The collar of his dark raincoat was turned up and his hat was pulled well down over his eyes. He stood for a moment looking round at them, his plump, cherubic face bland and inscrutable.

George Box, part time man-about-town and part time one of the most powerful crooks who had yet escaped the attentions of Scotland Yard, surveyed his assistants and prisoner.

‘Where’s Casson?’ he demanded.

‘In the office.’ Mr Knapp indicated a further door on the opposite side of the cellar. ‘Mr Levine and Jamieson are there, too.

Box nodded and hurried through the apartment, disappearing into the next.

The room he entered, although a cellar like the first, presented a very different appearance. Its walls had been coloured, a heavy carpet covered the floor, and it was furnished with a certain amount of taste and comfort.

The three men who lounged on the couch before the electric stove were different also to their colleagues without. There are as many social distinctions in crookdom as in the world upon which it preys. Here was the nucleus of the powerful organisation which caused Scotland Yard so much anxiety: Casson, a little, wiry man with the toothbrush moustache and bearing of an Army major; Jamieson, a quiet, grave-faced businessman; and Levine, perhaps the cleverest of the three, an elderly, dapper Frenchman, irreproachably dressed in the latest fashion.

Box took of his hat and coat and threw them on a chair.

‘Really, Casson,’ he said mildly, ‘I wish you wouldn’t leave your lady friends about my flat without warning me. I had a visitor at the time, and it was very awkward. I’ve got nothing against the girl, mind you. It was only the way she intruded. You don’t mind me mentioning it, do you?’

Casson started up in alarm.

‘Good heavens,’ he said, ‘who was there? I didn’t know what to do with the girl. I couldn’t very well have her here. The flat seemed to be the best place to leave her.’

Box sat down on the arm of the couch.

‘Look here, suppose we get this thing straight,’ he said. ‘In the first place, who on earth is she?’

Casson and Levine exchanged glances. In spite of Box’s light manner there was something sinister in his tone, an implied reproach which they were quick to notice.

‘We found her in the tube, hiding. She couldn’t give any account of herself, and it occurred to me that she might be dangerous.’

It was Levine who spoke, his slight French accent clipping the words.

Box smiled.

‘I see. So you tied her up and left her in the flat for me to deal with? I recognised your voice, Casson, over the microphone. I only hope that Inspector Fisher didn’t make a mental note of it also.’

‘Inspector Fisher?’

All three men stared at him.

‘In the flat? Good heavens, then he knows!’

‘Everything,’ said Box complacently. ‘He’s seen all the gadgets and was suitably impressed. I admit the sensational appearance of the girl was more than I’d bargained for.’

‘But how did he get there? How did he find it?’

‘I invited him, and I showed him,’ Box’s smile broadened.

Jamieson rose to his feet and peered into the round, smiling face.

‘What are you playing at, Box?’

‘Sit down. Don’t worry. Let me explain. It occurred to me that the tremendous police activities in the WX15 district, as they call it, are becoming irritating, to say the least of it Frankly, Jamieson, things are getting too hot. I considered the matter, and it dawned upon me, in a sort of blaze of understanding, that the best thing to do was to give them something to get their teeth into. I’ve been cultivating Fisher for some time, as you know; in fact, I might almost say he knows me quite well. He holds the interesting theory that I’m a half-wit—one of those elegant fireflies who spend their time between stage dressing-rooms and the better-class cocktail bars.

‘I told him I’d rented the flat for an aunt of mine, and that I thought there was something funny about it. At first he wasn’t interested, but when I gave him the address he perked up his ears and came along this evening. I showed him over the place, and was just going to leave him to draw his own conclusions when the girl made a sensational entry. I’m afraid she got away, and he’s after her.

‘If he caught her, how much will she be able to tell him?’

‘Not much,’ said Casson quickly. ‘Fortunately not much. We didn’t bring her here at all. We blindfolded her in the tube and took her up through the garage. She’d never recognise it again.’

‘Who d’you think she was? A police spy?’

‘No, I don’t think so. She’s too young for that. I can’t imagine what she was doing.’

Box’s eyes narrowed.

‘You ought to have found out.’

The other three were silent, and their leader rose from his seat on the arm of the couch and walked down the room.

‘I’ve covered our tracks with regard to the flat. Jack Simmons put it in the hands of an agent this morning, and I took it about an hour later, so if there’s any inquiry in that direction we’re covered. Now, since our friend in the next room has had about twelve hours to think it over, perhaps he may consider our proposition with a little more interest. Suppose we have him in.’

An ugly light came into Jamieson’s eyes.

‘The man’s a fool,’ he said. ‘I’m in favour of using a certain amount of third degree methods. You almost feel he wants to serve his sentence.’

Box regarded his colleague with mild disapproval.

‘My dear fellow, why so crude?’ he said. ‘Do remember we’re businessmen, even if our methods are a little unorthodox. You keep reverting to the bang-him-on-the-head school of thought. I don’t like it.’

‘That’s all very well, Box.’

It was Casson who spoke.

‘But we’ve got the fellow here, and as long as he’s here he’s a source of potential danger to us. If he’s discovered, things can be very awkward indeed. Don’t forget Parker!’

A regretful expression spread over Box’s round, friendly face.

‘That was a pity, I admit that,’ he said. ‘But the fellow was half out of the garage window. I agree with Bill it was the only thing he could have done. Besides, the fellow knew too much. Now I think we’ll concentrate on the business in hand. Let’s sit round the table, shall we? Casson, I wonder if you’d mind bringing our obstinate friend in from the other room.’

A few minutes later five men sat round the shining table in the comfortable, if slightly stuffy room.

Box, as chairman, took the head of the table, and Joseph Thurtle sat opposite him. His eyes were heavy, but there was still a sullen expression on his mouth, and his hands were clenched.

The other three men showed their reactions towards the situation in different ways. Jamieson was palpably nervous; the murder of Inspector Parker had got under his skin, and secretly he was afraid. His fear made him savage, and he glared at their captive as though he could hardly bear to keep his hands off him.

Levine was impassive, save for his bright black eyes which were fixed upon Thurtle's drawn face.

Casson watched Box, grudging admiration in the half smile on his lips.

That individual was the only one of the party who seemed completely at ease.

'Well, Mr Thurtle,' he said, 'you look tired. I do hope you haven't found your companions in the other room too boring. It is astounding how irritating one's intellectual inferiors can be if one lives with them. Suppose we take up our conversation where we left it yesterday?'

'I don't want to treat with you. You can hand me over to the police, if you like. I'm at the end of my tether. I'm done.'

'Well!' said Box. 'And I always thought you were an ambitious man. Come, come, Mr Thurtle, this ain't the way to treat friends who have gone to the extent of getting rid of a too attentive police officer and rescuing you. Suppose we talk business. You have a son in London, Mr Thurtle.'

For the first time during the conversation a flicker of animation came into the financier's dull eyes.

'He can't be here yet,' he said before he could check himself.

Box smiled.

'I'm glad to be able to give you the good news,' he said. 'Your son arrived at Southampton on board the *Elephantine* late last night. Naturally the authorities had no quarrel with him, and, apart from a somewhat sketchy surveillance, they're leaving him alone. I imagine their interest in him would be considerably increased if they realised that he carries half a million about with him—that half a million, which you, Mr Thurtle, were clever enough to rescue from the Trust crash.'

'That's a lie!'

The man was on his feet now, facing his enemies. His eyes were blazing, and he had all the stark defiance of an animal at bay in his quivering form.

'Well, well, well, why so defiant? You shouldn't protest so much. It makes people think. As I was saying before you interrupted me, with less manners than usual, I am sure the authorities will be more interested in

young Mr Rupert Thurtle when they hear the interesting piece of information I shall be able to give them. In fact. I shouldn't be at all surprised if it didn't alter their view completely, and if young Mr Thurtle were to stand in the dock beside you.'

'But he's innocent,' the old man persisted. 'He didn't realise what he was doing, and I didn't enlighten him. The fault is mine—entirely mine—and I'm prepared to pay for it.'

'Well, let's hope the authorities take the same view,' said Box pleasantly. 'I've often found, however,' he went on in a conversational tone, 'that it's very difficult indeed to convince them of a thing like that. They're inclined to be obstinate. Officialdom again, you know—the ruin of the country.'

Beads of sweat had appeared upon the financier's forehead.

'You're a fiend,' he said. 'What do you want me to do?'

Jamieson grunted. It was an expression of relief. Box's smile became, if possible, even more bland than before.

'I must say I prefer you in this kind of mood, Mr Thurtle,' he said. 'It brings out the softer side of your character, if I may say so. Well, now, suppose I outline this interesting little proposition to you.

'In the first place, my friends and I are not greedy. We should hate you to think that. We are prepared to go shares with you—equal shares. Write a letter to your son instructing him to pay us one half of the money he holds for you and we will release you and hand you over to him at any place he cares to name, so long as we are convinced that there is no police trap or other monkey trick of the kind. Well, now, that's very fair, isn't it?'

The financier sat down again.

'No,' he said. 'No, I won't be hijacked. You can do what you like, but I'll never write that letter.'

Box shrugged his shoulders.

'What a pity,' he said. 'I can sympathise with you, of course. I can see your point of view, and I'm inclined to admire it, but you see how it places me. I'm a man of conscience. In fact, my conscience is very strong and very active. In order to chloroform it, shall we say, I require a quarter of a million pounds. If it is not forthcoming, and this confounded conscience of mine remains active, I shall have to go to the authorities in my capacity of an intelligent and loyal citizen and tell them what I know. Your son's quite young, isn't he? It seems a pity. Twenty years, or even ten or fifteen, taken out of his life at this time will ruin him completely. What a pity!'

The clenched hands of the man who sat at the other end of the table moved involuntarily, and two bright spots of colour appeared in his ashen cheeks.

‘I don’t know who you are,’ he said, ‘but you deserve to be hanged.’

‘That’s very uncivil,’ said Box pleasantly. ‘Well, perhaps you wouldn’t mind going back to the other room now. I must go and see the authorities.’

The older man did not move, but remained where he was, his face working. At length a cry escaped him and he sprawled forward across the table.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘All right. I’m beaten. I’ll do it!’

With a muttered exclamation of triumph, Jamieson leant forward across the table, but Box laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

‘That’s very wise of you, Mr Thurtle,’ he said softly. Very wise, indeed. I was only putting my own case to you. My friends have devised other means of persuasion.’

He took a fountain-pen from his pocket and handed it politely to the stricken man. Casson brought notepaper and an envelope from a desk in the corner.

‘One moment.’ Box’s face was very grave. I should like to point out to you, Mr Thurtle,’ he said, in a voice completely unlike the bantering tone he had previously used, ‘that we are not joking. Nor are we fools. Any attempt on your part to double-cross us, to drop a concealed hint to your son or to frustrate us in any way, and we have our revenge. It is very simple, and we shall not hesitate.’

The other man looked up and met his eyes.

‘I understand,’ he said solemnly. ‘You and I can take each other’s words. Honour among thieves!’ He laughed bitterly on the last words, and while Levine reddened angrily, Box’s smile broadened.

‘How true,’ he said.

The elder man wrote swiftly, and when he had finished he handed the sheet to his captor.

Box read it through aloud.

‘I have been hijacked. I am held here for ransom. For heaven’s sake, obey instructions, since my life depends upon it. Pay up to one half of what you hold. I dare not write any more, but do this for me. Yours, DAD.’

‘Yes, I think that’ll do very nicely.’ Box drew a paper from his pocket-book and put it on the table. ‘This is a sample of your handwriting,’ he said. ‘I took the precaution of procuring it so that we should not have any hitch at the outset. Yes, that will do. I congratulate you, Mr Thurtle, on your intelligence. Now, since we are partners, as it were, perhaps you would prefer to spend your time in here? It’s warmer and more comfortable. I’m afraid one of us will have to remain with you, but I assure you that you will find any of these three gentlemen excellent company—quite different from the person Knapp, who, I admit, has all the hallmarks of the complete social failure.’

He put the two papers carefully in his pocket and went over to the door.

‘Bill,’ he said, ‘I am thinking of going out. Just make certain that everything is perfectly clear, will you?’

The words died on his lips, for at that moment Mr Knapp came hurrying into the room.

‘I say,’ he said, ‘I thought I’d choked the ’tecs off, but there’s a whole group of ’em round the garage.’

Box thrust out a hand and caught his shoulder.

‘What’s this?’ he demanded sternly. As he jerked the man towards him he revealed unexpected strength for one of his stature.

Somewhat incoherently, Mr Knapp poured out the story of Fisher’s visit to the garage that evening with Davidson.

‘Look out, guv’nor,’ he concluded. ‘Your fingers ain’t ’alf bitin’ into my shoulder! What d’you think I am? Bloomin’ rat or somethin’?’

‘I wouldn’t embarrass you by telling you in front of all these people,’ said Box. But his usual good humour had vanished and there was an element of anxiety in his voice. ‘I thought that garage was perfectly safe. It is outside the area, and until now they haven’t had a line on it.

‘They got you on a car ticket from the Formby Hotel, you say? Well, I wonder how that happened—’

He stood thinking for some moments, and then a sudden expression of alarm flickered across his face for an instant.

‘Parker,’ he said. ‘Parker. He was in that office alone for about five minutes. My heaven, Knapp, you ought to clean up that place of yours. Your filthy shed and disgusting business methods will be the finish of us,’

As he flung the man from him he glanced round the group. Their faces were white, and there was something very near panic in some of their eyes.

Box's good humour returned as if by magic.

'If only it wasn't Fisher we might have something to worry about,' he said easily. 'But I assure you if you knew that man you wouldn't be alarmed. He's the most harmless, good-tempered soul alive, with about as much brains as an overfed Pekinese. Oh, well, we must take to the tube!'

Casson went over to him. 'Be careful of the mews exit,' he murmured. 'There's a patrol which goes through there every twenty minutes.'

Box nodded.

'I just missed it,' he said, 'as I came in. But don't worry. I think in the circumstances I shall take a trip on our emergency railway. Bill and Knapp can come with me, just in case of accidents.'

Casson raised his eyebrows.

'The store?' he said softly. 'That's not very safe, is it?'

Box patted his shoulder.

'My dear fellow,' he said, 'what an engaging person you are. I don't know whether it's occurred to you, but the whole method by which we live is not exactly renowned for safety.

Casson looked after him as he went through the door. He had a tremendous admiration for Box, but there were times when he was afraid.

7

FISHER GETS A LEAD

'Call this a joy-ride? It gives me the creeps!'

Mr Knapp's unlovely voice was raised in the stuffy gloom.

''As it ever occurred to you,' he said, 'what'd 'appen if someone was to set a parcels trolley in motion, and it was to come 'urtling down 'ere like one o'clock? Where should we be then, I'd like to know?'

'Safely under it and out of this business for good,' said Box cheerfully.

The three men were walking down the old Post Office tube now used by the two branches of Westbridge's Department Stores. Box went in front with a torch. Mr Knapp trotted along at his elbow, and Bill the Swede brought up the rear. They bent low to avoid the overhanging electric cables which propelled the swift little parcels trucks from one shop to the other.

Here and there along the line there were old 'stations' which marked the sites of long-disused post offices. Mr Knapp's garage was one, and there

was another beneath the modern block of Winton Street flats. But these had been long passed by the three, and they now came to a bend beyond which was the faint light of a single electric bulb.

This was the end of the tube as it was now used; the dispatch department of Westbridge's Oxford Circus branch.

Box turned of his torch and spoke softly.

'Keep back! There's an armed watchman on the premises, and it's most important we shouldn't get caught tonight.'

'It's most important we shouldn't get caught any time, I 'ope,' said Mr Knapp truculently, and he shrank closer to the dusty sides of the tube.

The dispatch department was yet another of the old 'stations'. A low concrete platform ran down to the rails, and five or six parcels trucks were drawn up at the far end. The single electric bulb, which was kept alight night and day, glowed over the ghostly and deserted scene.

Motioning to the others to follow him, Box crept forward across the concrete way and tried the doors leading into the back basement of the shop. They were unlocked, since the only approach to them was through the shop's private tunnel.

He passed through silently. Mr Knapp, sniffing irritatingly, followed him, and Bill, a life-preserver clenched in one mighty fist, came last.

Inside all was pitch dark and uncannily quiet. Box drew out his torch and flashed it round.

They were in a huge packing cellar, but the doors to the concrete staircase stood open, and they moved towards it.

They climbed up the stairs on silent, rubber-shod feet. At the first landing they paused. Had they been attempting burglary nothing would have been more simple, but since their intention was merely to get out, the problem was, perversely, more difficult.

The service doors were closed with huge iron bolts which would make a tremendous noise when moved. Moreover, they were probably well provided with burglar-alarms.

Box seemed to have an uncanny gift of finding his way about, however, and he led the others down a corridor, past great showrooms covered with ghostly piles of merchandise under dust-sheet shrouds, and came at last to the thing he sought, a side door in the street.

It was at this moment that Mr Knapp caught his breath noisily, and Box, glancing over his shoulder, saw the flickering light of a torch coming

towards them down the passage.

It was the night watchman.

Box whispered to Bill:

‘He’s armed. Attend to him.’ And then, with all the coolness in the world, he bent again over the lock which held the door.

Mr Knapp, who, to do him credit, had more courage than would appear, stepped forward into the passage and tore off down it like a rabbit.

The night watchman turned his torch full upon him, and his startled voice shattered the silence.

‘Hands up, my lad! You’re covered!’

Mr Knapp turned at the far end of the cul-de-sac, and the watchman, keeping his torch full upon him, advanced, his gun levelled.

He passed within a few feet of Bill and Box, who were still working unconcernedly upon the door. As the man went by, Bill leapt forward. For a second the life-preserver hung in the air, and then descended with a thud upon a spot just above the man’s left ear.

He went down without a groan and lay sprawling upon the ground, his gun and torch flying wide.

Mr Knapp came back grinning.

Box was still working on the catch which held the door. A new system of locks had recently been installed at Westbridge’s, and his task was not as simple as he had hoped.

It was at this moment that the disturbing thing happened. The lights suddenly went on all over the building. The effect was terrifying, and Box started back from the door with an oath. At first he fancied that he had disturbed the mechanism of some new burglar alarm attached to the door, but the next moment he knew that he was wrong. He could hear the sound of voices and the tramp of feet.

He swung round on the terrified Knapp and Bill.

‘Get back to the tube. Whatever you do, don’t get caught. Go on. Beat it!’

They needed no second bidding, and the Swede lumbered off the way they had come, while Mr Knapp seemed to have disappeared into thin air at the first word of command.

Box himself stepped into one of the great deserted showrooms, leapt lightly over a counter, and crouched there, his gun drawn. He could hear people moving, and then the gruff, unmistakable voice of a police constable echoed from the passage he had just left.

‘Hallo, what’s this? Quick! Here’s the watchman, laid out!’

There was a trample of feet, a certain amount of confused conversation, and then silence.

Box was no coward, but neither was he a fool. He realised that now the watchman had been found by the police, a thorough and most exhaustive search of the whole building would ensue.

He crept along, keeping his head below the counter, and worked bis way to the end of the showroom until there was only six feet of open space between him and the service stairs.

He raised himself cautiously and looked about him. At first he thought no one was in sight, but suddenly a slight sound above him made him look up.

A narrow balcony ran round the showroom, from which great double doors led into other departments. Two people stood upon this, deep in conversation. Their backs were towards him, and he knew himself to be undiscovered.

But what startled him and sent an unaccustomed thrill of alarm through his heart was the fact that he had recognised them.

Standing talking on the balcony was no other person than Bob Fisher himself, and beside him was a girl. Even at that distance Box recognised her. It was the young woman who had been left bound on the hall chair of the Southwold Mansions flat less than two hours before.

He crept away and sped down, making for the tube.

Meanwhile, up on the balcony, Fisher continued his conversation with the girl with the red-gold hair.

‘But they were here,’ she said excitedly. ‘There was someone here!’

Fisher grinned.

‘That’s all right,’ he said. ‘We’ve got the place surrounded, and if there’s anyone still left in the shop we shall catch them. But I rather fancy they’ll have taken to the tube again. It was very lucky I caught up with you in Perry Street, Miss Bellew!’

Phyllis Bellew looked at him gratefully.

‘I was a fool to run away,’ she said, ‘but I was so scared that the moment I was free I just took to my heels and ran. I didn’t know where I was, and I had only the vaguest idea of how I’d got there.’

The detective nodded.

‘I shall want a complete statement from you, if you don’t mind. I think I’ve got the facts fairly clear, but one or two points remain. You’re in charge

of the dispatch service here, aren't you?'

She nodded.

'Yes; I'm going all through the business. My father is the manager of this branch.'

'I see. And you noticed that someone had been tampering with your delivery trucks?'

She nodded again.

'I ought to have informed the police right away. But I—I didn't know they'd be helpful like you. I thought they would be difficult, officious people. Anyway, I decided I'd make my own investigations. Not a very intelligent thing to do, I'm afraid.'

Fisher smiled wryly.

'Well, not very wise, perhaps, when you're dealing with this kind of customer. So you went down the tube alone after closing hours this evening?'

'Yes. I had a torch, and I'm afraid I didn't think there was anything to worry about except rats. I seemed to walk for miles, and I passed one disused platform, which, I think, must have been built in the Post Office time, and then a good deal further on I came to another. This was much cleaner than the other, and—well, it looked used. So I climbed off the track to investigate. I went through an archway and found a stone flight of stairs. I went up, feeling that I couldn't be trespassing, since, as far as I knew, the whole line belonged to the stores. Then I saw a door with a crack of light under it.

'I pushed it open and went in. The next thing I knew, someone had thrown a sack over my head and I was knocked to the ground. Then, with my head still covered, they bound my hands and ankles, and someone picked me up and carried me quite a long way. I struggled to get free, but it was impossible, and finally they put me down on a stone floor and I heard them whispering.'

'When you say "them", how many were there?'

The girl screwed up her eyes in an effort to remember.

'I don't know. Three, I imagine, or perhaps four.'

'Men?'

'Yes, I didn't hear a woman's voice.'

'Can you remember the voices? Anything they said?'

‘They were whispering. I couldn’t catch any words, but I felt that some of the voices were better educated than others, if you see what I mean. Finally, I was put in a car and driven through some streets. Then I think I must have fainted. I don’t remember any more until I saw you bending over me.’

‘I see,’ said Fisher. ‘Well, we’ll have all that written down, if you don’t mind coming back with me. Meanwhile, you’d better ring up your people. They may be anxious. It’s dreadfully late. There are phones here, of course, aren’t there?’

‘Thank you for reminding me,’ she said gratefully.

Bob Fisher watched her go off down the balcony, but whatever he was thinking it was put out of his mind by the arrival of a sergeant.

‘Everything’s quiet now, sir. They’ve taken to the tube. As far as we can see, nothing’s been touched, although we can’t be sure of that, of course, until tomorrow, when the assistants return. The watchman’s coming round nicely. He’s still a bit dizzy, though. Says he knows there must have been two men, but he only saw one. He can’t give a very clear description of him at the moment, but thinks he’ll be able to remember better when his head clears. I’ve sent a couple of men down the tube. Is that right?’

‘No,’ said Fisher quickly. ‘Call them back. I think our best way is to sit tight at the end of the tube, sergeant. If you go down a rat hole, you know, you drive the creatures out the other end. But if you sit quietly at the opening, that’s when you catch your rats. We must concentrate on stopping up the holes and waiting till they come up for air.’

The sergeant went off to recall his men, and Fisher strolled down to the main hall of the stores to wait for Phyllis Bellew. As he went he was conscious of a secret glow of exultation. Things were beginning to move at last. Instinct told him he was on the right track, although one thing still puzzled him intensely: the identity of the man behind it all, the brain which had conceived the whole cunning scheme

8

TRAPPED!

‘I don’t like it, Box. It’s dangerous.’

Casson strode up and down the small room, his hands deep in his pockets, a frankly scared expression in his eyes.

Thurtle had been relegated to the outer room again and for the time being Box, Casson and Levine were alone.

Jamieson came in a moment later. His face was very pale.

‘We’re trapped,’ he said. ‘It’s happened at last. I always knew it would some day. The store end of the tube is filled with police. The garage is watched most carefully, and there are three or four plain-clothes men actually in the mews.’ His voice rose hysterically. ‘D’you realise it? We’re caught. They’ll get us.’

Box, perched on the edge of the table, grinned irritatingly at the other man. Two sharp lines of anxiety across his forehead were the only indication of strain which he bore.

‘Don’t get hysterical,’ he said lightly. ‘You haven’t got the build for it, Jamieson. It makes you look slightly foolish, if I may say so. Don’t worry. We’re very comfortable here, aren’t we?’

The other man stared at him.

‘Don’t play the fool, Box,’ he said. ‘This isn’t the time for it. We’re up against something worse than anything we’ve ever tackled before. I tell you we’re trapped.’

‘I see no reason for getting excited just because we’ve got a few coppers hanging round the house, as it were.’

Box’s tone was still light, although there was just the faint suggestion of anxiety in his voice.

‘Don’t worry,’ he repeated. We’ve got out of worse scrapes than this, Besides, you mustn’t forget our guest, the amiable Mr Thurtle, who is going to pay us so handsomely for his deliverance. It would be a pity to lose our heads just now when everything’s going so well.’

‘It’s all very well talking like this.’ Levine had broken into the conversation. ‘I am afraid you are just trying to encourage us, my friend. I am afraid that you, too, are alarmed. After all, you have in your pocket the letter to young Thurtle, but you have not yet been able to deliver that letter. Isn’t that so?’

There was a suggestion of more colour in Box’s round face at this announcement, but he still seemed completely at ease.

‘Of our three exits it occurs to me that the mews is by far the most convenient,’ he observed. ‘I think I shall go out that way. After all, as you

point out, Levine, I really ought to deliver Mr Thurtle's message to his son. Yes, I think the mews.'

'But it's madness!'

It was Casson who spoke.

'If you're caught you bring the whole hornet's nest down upon us.'

Box laughed.

'If I'm caught. It's funny what a difference that one little word makes.'

He walked over to the desk in the corner and, taking a small steel key from his pocket, unlocked a drawer in its depths. From this hiding-place he extracted three glass balls, resembling gold balls, save that they were apparently lined with some silvery substance. These he placed very carefully in the pocket of his raincoat.

From another drawer he took out a gun and slipped it into his hip pocket.

'What are you going to do?' Jamieson's eyes were fixed upon him questioningly.

It was one of George Box's foibles that he hardly ever carried a gun, but, on the rare occasions when he did so, never came back without using it.

'Be careful,' muttered Levine. 'Don't forget Parker. I saw in the evening papers that they've found the body.'

'Of course they've found the body,' said Box. 'The police are always finding bodies in Epping Forest. It's quite the fashionable spot to leave them. I don't think I shall ask any of you gentlemen to accompany me; you're too jumpy. I'll draw my recruits from the other room. I suggest that you sit round the fire and tell one another's fortunes by cards, or amuse yourselves with any other ladylike pastime. You can expect me back in about an hour. By the way, if you hear a certain amount of noise upstairs, don't be alarmed. There's nothing whatever to be excited about.'

He went out and the three men left in the room exchanged glances.

'He has courage,' said Levine.

'He's a fool,' said Jamieson.

'He likes to pretend he is a fool,' said Casson. 'I wish I had his stupidity.'

Jamieson said nothing, but began to pace the floor, and there were beads of sweat upon his forehead.

Meanwhile, in the outer room, Box had signalled to Simmons and Tim. They got up and followed him without a word. He stepped out of the room and into the dark, damp smelling passage without.

It was very narrow and scarcely high enough for a man to stand upright. To their left there was a flight of steps leading down to the tube, and opposite them the narrow tunnel wound upward.

Keeping his head low, Box advanced cautiously up this way. It was pitch dark and clammy with damp, but it was evident that they all knew the way well, for they hurried along with apparent unconcern.

At length the tunnel broadened into a square cavity with a very high roof. In this there was a ladder, stretching up into the gloom above.

Box mounted it and they followed.

The top of the ladder rested against a small wooden platform built on to the wall like a shelf. Box climbed on to it and his head came within a few inches of the roof. He knocked upon the boards above his head very softly and waited.

Almost at once the signal was answered. Three soft thuds, followed by one loud one, sounded from the other side of the partition.

Tim clambered up beside Box and together they thrust back the heavy iron bolts that kept the trapdoor shut, and then let it gently downwards.

There was the sound of something heavy rustling to one side and they clambered up into an extraordinary apartment.

The trapdoor through which they had entered lay directly beneath the lower half of an enormous bed, under which there was just room for them to creep out. In the bed, propped up among a nest of cushions, lay a little old woman. Her face was incredibly wrinkled, but her black eyes were sharp and intelligent.

She greeted them with a wide, toothless grin and muttered some completely unintelligible remark.

Box beamed at her.

‘Thank you, Mrs Wheeler,’ he said. ‘Sorry to disturb you again so soon. Rather a lot of traffic this way tonight, I’m afraid.’

‘Be careful.’

A woman’s voice spoke out of the gloom that enveloped the far end of the room, and the next moment a tall figure glided forward. A woman dressed in the uniform of a Sister of Mercy stood before them. She looked the part perfectly, but when she spoke the uninitiated might have been a little surprised by her tone and manner.

‘You can’t go out there. It’s dangerous. It’s a good job you put me on to watch tonight. She’s so old you never know what she might tell ’em.’ She

pointed to the strange little old figure in the bed. ‘The police have been here three times tonight already. They’ve knocked up everybody in the mews. They don’t suspect us more than anyone else, but they’ve got their eye on the whole place. For heaven’s sake, be careful.’

Box signalled to her to be quiet and tiptoed over towards the door. Opening a flap in the panelling, he peered out into the yard. The sight which met his eyes was not reassuring. Three men stood talking in the middle of the yard. He fancied he could see others lurking at the only exit. But what particularly surprised and discomfited him was the fact that the tallest of the three silent figures, not a dozen yards away from him, was Fisher himself. The man seemed to be ubiquitous.

Box swore under his breath. He had underestimated the energy of this apparently slow-witted young man. It was evident that he was tenacious, too; certainly not a man easily put off his purpose.

A sudden misgiving seized the watching crook. Perhaps he had been unwise in associating himself with the flat. Perhaps already Fisher knew too much.

A strange expression crept on to the round face that was usually so good humoured, a curious, remorseless look which set his lips into a firm line and narrowed the ingenuous blue eyes to slits.

Box drew out his revolver. Then he beckoned his two companions and gave them some muttered instructions.

‘Look here, Grace,’ he went on, turning to the woman, ‘you lie low. They’ll come here, but don’t worry about that. Rave at ’em for disturbing the old woman, if you like, but don’t forget to play your part. This is going to be a ticklish job, but the way we shall work it I don’t think there’s a chance in a million that they’ll associate us with you if you play your part properly. Are you ready, Tim? Tackle low, remember’

The big man grunted and Jack laughed softly.

‘That’s Fisher himself out there, isn’t it?’ he whispered. ‘Will you get him?’

Box’s hand closed over the butt of his gun.

‘I might,’ he said softly. ‘It occurs to me, Jack, that I might. Now, ready?’

He pulled the flap in the door open wider. His movements were so quiet that even those in the room could not hear him make the least sound.

Having got the opening clear and with a stream of cool air blowing in upon his face, Box felt softly in his coat pocket.

He drew out one of the little silver balls and held it for a moment poised delicately between thumb and forefinger. Then he raised his arm and there was a tiny click far off across the yard as the pellet struck the bricks.

One of the three plain-clothes men swung round in its direction, but, seeing nothing, he turned again to his companions. What he had not noticed in the gloom was the cloud of greyish smoke arising from the tiny broken missile.

Box hurled another of the smoke bombs, and another, one in the direction of the gateway, one further down the yard.

The effect was extraordinary. Within three minutes great clouds of smoke were belching out of the yard, with the detectives coughing and staggering in the midst of them.

Someone was blowing a police whistle furiously.

Box seized his opportunity. The moment the smoke became dense enough to cover his tracks he threw open the door, and, with his two companions following him, slipped softly out.

The woman closed and barred the way behind them.

The difficulty of the smoke screen was that, once in it, they were blinded themselves, but Box was undeterred. He pressed on towards the opening between the two shops at the far end of the mews.

Once a figure loomed towards him and he had the satisfaction of seeing Tim hurl himself upon the policeman and bear him heavily to the ground

With Jack behind him he hurried forward. As he reached the beginning of the narrow cobbled way which led out of the mews into the street he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure towering up through the billowing smoke. It was Fisher, standing ready to seize any man who attempted to leave the yard.

Box raised his gun.

It was at that moment that the young inspector stepped back off the kerb in the fog, stumbled and indubitably saved his life. A bullet whirled over his head and flattened itself against the brickwork of the house behind him.

He drew his own gun and fired. The bullet glanced through the sleeve of Box’s raincoat, but, seeing his way was clear, the crook did not hesitate but dived through the passage into the street.

Jack would have followed him, but he had reckoned without Fisher. From his place of vantage at the top of the yard Box, looking over his shoulder,

saw the two men struggling. He fired again and heard Fisher cry out as he staggered and clapped his hand to his side.

Then Box waited for no more. He slipped out into the street and walked swiftly away in the direction of Oxford Circus.

From the yard behind him the revolver shots had occasioned a perfect tumult of police whistles, and from every road in the police-infested vicinity uniformed constables came hurrying to answer the summons.

Box came face to face with one man, who almost knocked him over as he came hurrying round a corner into the street. An ordinary criminal might have found this encounter disturbing, to say the least of it, more especially as his revolver lay heavy in his raincoat pocket and there was a suspicious tear in his sleeve. Box took it like everything else, in his stride, however.

‘I say, there’s something tremendously dangerous going on down there, constable,’ he said, his rather foolish voice squeaky with excitement. ‘It looks as though a house is on fire in Winton Mews. I was going to have a look at it, but then I heard shots, and I thought perhaps I’d better get out of the way.

‘You thought right, sir,’ said the constable, who had no time for foolish young men. ‘You get along.’ He hitched his belt as he spoke and continued down the street at the double.

Box did not even trouble to glance after him. As he strode along he was feeling peculiarly pleased with himself.

At Oxford Circus he turned into a public call-box and rang up Mr Rupert Thurtle at the huge Anglo-American hotel in Cornwall Street, where he was staying under the assumed name of Crayle. Because of the hour Box had some difficulty in, persuading the night porter at the De Rigueur to put him through to the young man’s room. But Box’s powers of persuasion were enormous and in the end the man consented to put ‘Mr Crayle’s oldest friend’ through to the instrument in the young financier’s bedroom.

It was answered almost immediately and Box guessed that Thurtle junior had been finding it hard to sleep.

‘Hallo, Mr Thurtle,’ he said softly.

There was a perceptible pause, during which the American was evidently making up his mind whether to admit to the name or no.

Box continued, speaking softly.

‘I’m afraid I can’t introduce myself very fully over the phone, but I am alone and I bring you a message from Spider. Do you hear me? Spider.

Could I see you at once, do you think?'

A smothered exclamation at the other end of the wire told him that the use of Joseph Thurtle's family nickname had been successful.

'Right. Yes. When can you come?'

Box answered cautiously.

'I could be with you in under ten minutes. By the way, Mr Thurtle, I should advise you not to try any monkey tricks. Any communication with the police will be followed by the instant lodging of information with them concerning your luggage. Do you understand me?'.

'I don't know who you are,' said the strange voice at the other end of the phone, 'but you seem to know everything. If you will come to this hotel at once I will see you alone. I shall not be foolish enough to make any communication with the police.'

Box hung up the receiver.

A little over fifteen minutes later a pale-faced, dishevelled young man in pyjamas and dressing-gown sat in his hotel bedroom reading and re-reading the message which Box had brought.

That young man, completely at ease, sat perched on the edge of the bed.

'Well?' he said at last. 'This is a business deal, Mr Thurtle. I hope you will not be so silly as to raise any objections to a scheme of which your father has already approved very vehemently, if I may say so.'

Rupert Thurtle passed his hand over his forehead. Then he looked up and faced the smiling man before him.

'This is my father's handwriting,' he said. 'And these are the words he would use. And yet the whole letter is unlike him.'

Box remained silent, and the other man went on:

'I don't know your name,' he said, 'and I don't expect you will give it me, but I feel there is something I must point out to you. That is, the money which you demand is the only weapon I have with which to defend my father legally. If I part with the money and he still falls into the hands of the police, I am lost.'

'In other words,' said Box easily, 'you want to make certain that you're going to get the goods.'

'Yes, I want to make sure that, if I pay, my father will be a free man—at least, so far as you are concerned.'

Box considered. He was no fool and the request was reasonable.

'How soon can you actually lay your hands on the money?' he inquired.

‘Tomorrow morning. Naturally, I dare not keep so much in negotiable securities in my hotel room.’

‘It’s in a safe deposit, I suppose?’

‘Naturally.’

Box bent forward.

‘At Lantern Bay, a little place on the coast just beyond Southampton, there is a motor yacht,’ he said. ‘Its captain is a very intelligent, discreet person called Tomlinson. I will see that he meets you at the Ship Hotel there at noon tomorrow. Take the money with you and wait on the boat. I shall bring your father down by car. Pay me the money there, and if you take my advice you’ll smuggle your father into southern Ireland. I may as well warn you, however, that any attempt to double-cross me and my friends and—well, we are not particularly fond of your father and I don’t suppose any of us would be completely heart-broken if the police discovered that in attempting to escape he had been accidentally drowned.’

The words were spoken lightly, but there was an undercurrent of sincerity in the quiet voice which made young Thurtle look up sharply, a light of fear in his eyes.

When Box had first entered, the American had been struck by the ingenuous, friendly expression in the very blue eyes, but now, as he stared, he caught a glimpse of something else, something purposeful, something relentless.

‘Very well,’ he said. Yes. I—I quite understand. Tomorrow at noon; then—my father.’

The cold blue eyes smiled into his own.

‘Tomorrow,’ Box agreed. ‘A quarter of a million pounds.’

9

STRANGE INTERVIEW

It was nearly dawn when the solitary figure in the dark raincoat walked slowly down Perry Street. Since he was quite alone, Box had permitted the mask of bland good humour, which he usually wore, to drop from his face. He did not make the mistake of deceiving himself; the situation was desperate.

For some hours now he had been doing his best to return to his underground retreat where his assistants and his prisoner awaited him. It was not simple. Both store entrances to the tube were guarded by police. The garage also was surrounded and Winton Mews was infested by plain-clothes men. All the entrances were blocked.

For the time being he was checked.

He walked on slowly, his quick brain reviewing the situation in its every aspect. He was not sure what effect his shot had had on Fisher, or whether Jack had been successful in getting away. On the whole, Box rather fancied he had; it was one of that young man's peculiarities that he fought like a fiend, and had the slipperiness of the proverbial eel.

Yes; at the moment things were desperate. At noon, young Rupert Thurtle would be waiting with the ransom. Somehow or other his father had got to be spirited away from beneath the very eyes of the police.

It was at the moment when this problem had presented itself with all its difficulties that Box, in passing, happened to glance up at the uninspired façade of Southwold Mansions. As he did so he was conscious of a thrill of surprise. Every window in his flat was ablaze with light. He stood there looking up at the windows for some moments, and then, with that characteristic recklessness which made him the personality he was, he turned into the darkened entrance of the flats and went quietly upstairs.

As he approached his own door, he took off his raincoat and hung it negligently over his arm, so that the tear made by the flying bullet was not apparent.

He thrust his latchkey into the lock, opened the door and walked in. He closed the door noisily, threw his hat and coat on to the stand and strode into the main room.

He had prepared himself to meet any emergency, and nothing but the merest flicker when he caught sight of the figure reclining in the big chair in front of the fire. It was Fisher

He looked very white and his shoulder was roughly bandaged. He was also wearing Box's own dressing-gown.

'Hallo, Box,' he said. 'I say, I hope you didn't mind me coming back here, but I've got to hang about this district, and I'd had a bit of a scrap. It occurred to me that this was the most comfortable and convenient place. I felt pretty sick when I found you weren't in, but the door was on the latch and so I walked in and made myself comfortable.'

Box stifled a desire to laugh. There was something definitely amusing in the situation, he found. So his bullet had gone wide. He was angry with himself for that.

He slipped back into the part that he always played when in Fisher's company with ease born of long practice.

'Not at all. Good idea,' he said. 'I say, what's the matter? Hurt yourself? Where have you been all this time? I've been careering round the streets looking for you and that girl. When I realised I'd missed you I didn't feel like coming back. I've been on to the all-night café in Piccadilly.'

He walked over to the hearthrug and stood looking down with apparently friendly concern at the man he had attempted to kill such a short while before.

'What's all the drapery for?' he demanded, indicating the bandages.

Fisher grinned.

'Nothing very much. We had a bit of a dust-up in Winton Mews and a fellow put a bullet through the fleshy part of my shoulder. It's nothing at all —merely a nuisance.'

Box's blue eyes grew round with childlike astonishment.

'Really?' he said. 'Winton Mews? Why, that's quite near here, isn't it? Good heavens, this flat isn't at all the place for auntie. What's up? Did you catch the girl?'

Fisher nodded.

'Yes,' he said. 'But that was hours ago. She had an extraordinary story to tell. D'you know, Box, this flat of yours is owned by crooks?

'Really?' Box's eyes were twinkling, no doubt with suppressed excitement.

'I'm afraid so.' Fisher spoke slowly. 'I won't bother you with a lot of details, but there's an underground tunnel used by two stores as a sort of parcels shoot, and this girl was investigating a certain trouble they'd had with their dispatch service when she was kidnapped and brought up here.'

'Really?' said Box again.

He was sitting on the edge of his chair and his expression of mingled excitement and alarm was positively comic.

'I say, I'll move out first thing tomorrow. I don't want to be mixed up with anything like this. Look here, what are you doing? Although, I forgot, you bobbies are like doctors; you never tell, do you?'

The detective grinned.

‘Not in the usual way.’ he said. ‘But as a matter of fact tonight I feel I’d like to talk this thing over with someone, and, after all, although you’re a congenital idiot, Box, you can keep your mouth shut, can’t you?’

‘Me? I’m silent as the grave, and about as deep.’

‘Well, this is strictly unofficial; get that into your our head. But I believe we’re on the verge of a big thing. I don’t know if you read the papers at all, but you must have heard of the disappearance of Joseph Thurtle, the financier.’

Box looked vague.

‘Oh, yes,’ he went on, brightening up suddenly as his mind appeared to have taken hold of the problem. ‘I do remember now. You fellows made a complete hash of his arrest, didn’t you? I remember now. There was a leader in one of the papers—oh, very uncomplimentary. I say, are you on to this fellow?’

It was a superb piece of acting. The blue eyes revealed nothing but ordinary interest, and the hand that held the cigarette he smoked was perfectly steady.

Fisher hesitated.

‘I ought not to talk like this,’ he said, ‘but I’m nervy tonight, or something. A most irritating thing happened to me down in the yard. When that fellow shot me I caught his assistant. The fellow wriggled like a fish, but I got him by the back of the jacket. Then my shoulder started to go numb, and although I clung on to his coat with one hand my other one was helpless. Before the sergeant who was with me could get up with us the brute had slipped out of his coat and streaked off down the road like a shadow. I was just left with the coat, which won’t be much help.’

Fisher shook his head.

‘Hard lines.’ Box managed to look genuinely sympathetic. ‘Look here, you’re done up. Hadn’t you better get to bed?’

‘No, I don’t think so. We’re on the eve of a very big thing, and if I can only carry through my plan this morning, I shall have Thurtle in gaol by one o’clock, and, better still, an even more important person from the English police;s point of view will be keeping him company.’

Box bent forward to flick his cigarette ash into the fireplace.

‘Sounds exciting,’ he said. ‘Can I hear, or am I too young to know?’

Fisher hesitated.

‘It’s awfully unprofessional,’ he said, ‘but I do want to talk the thing out. This fellow is one of the most important crooks in the whole of secret, underground London. He kidnapped Thurtle with the idea of holding him up to ransom. I call him the Mystery Man of Soho. We’ve been looking for his hiding place for months, but now I do believe I’ve stumbled upon it.’

He lowered his voice.

‘It’s somewhere in one of the old post office stations along the line of the disused tube.’

Box raised mild blue eyes to the other man’s face.

‘I can hardly believe such things exist,’ he said deliberately, but his hand had strayed to the heavy object lying in his coat-pocket.

Blissfully unconcerned, Fisher went on.

‘I’ve narrowed it down,’ he continued complacently, ‘and as soon as it’s light I shall put the little scheme into operation. It’s beautifully simple. You see, these fellows have only three possible exits: either of the stores, and one other in Winton Mews. Well, I’ve arranged for a strong force of police to wait at the beginning of the tunnel in each store. We also have Winton Mews completely surrounded. When I give the signal my two posses of police at either end of the store will advance slowly down the tube, examining every conceivable outlet on the way. Well, you see what that means. These fellows will be driven out into Winton Mews and we shall nab the whole lot of them. It’s a peach of a scheme.’

Box, who had been listening to this recital with his head slightly on one side, regarded the man opposite with open admiration.

‘I say, I didn’t think you had it in you,’ he said. ‘I always imagined you coppers were bone from the neck up. I don’t mean that offensively. It’s the general idea, you know.’

Fisher went on with great satisfaction.

‘It’s not a bad little plan,’ he said, ‘and I’ve got a hunch it’s going to succeed. I’m only waiting till it’s light so there’s no possible chance of anyone getting away in the flight from the mews. It sounds pretty fool-proof, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Box slowly. ‘Unless—I say—of course, I don’t know anything about these things, but are you sure you’ve got every exit covered? I mean, are you sure they can’t get out some other way?’

‘Certain.’ Fisher sounded quite childishly pleased with himself. ‘I thought at first that there was another way out through a garage in Grafton

Street, and I had the boys watching it until about an hour ago. But then it dawned upon me that we were probably wasting our time. I got a search warrant and examined the place thoroughly, and satisfied myself there was nothing there. So I've withdrawn the guard—or I've just sent a sergeant to—and I shall wait here, I think, until it's light.'

'Well, I'm not staying,' said Box, with sudden deliberation. 'The whole thing's too darned risky for me. I suppose you'd think I was an unutterable funk if I went and took a room in a hotel?'

Fisher laughed.

'You're hopeless,' he said. 'I was going to offer to take you with me.'

'Not on your life!' Box looked genuinely appalled. 'This isn't in my line at all. Finding a flat full of gadgets is one thing, but revolver shots and desperate criminals just haven't got the same appeal in my young life. I'l ring you up later in the day and find out if you're still alive.'

Fisher looked uncomfortable.

'Look here, I can't turn you out like this,' he said.

'Nonsense! Anything to oblige an old friend. You stay where you are, then if anything queer happens in this beastly place it'll happen to you and not to me.'

Box went out into the hall, still talking volubly. Outside the door he drew out his gun and hesitated. Finally, however, he shrugged his shoulders and began to laugh silently to himself.

Later on, after he had shouted a cheery good-bye, he went slowly down the stairs to the street, his shoulders heaving. From his point of view, the situation certainly had its amusing side.

10

ESCAPE

'You're right, boss. The guard was withdrawn about three-quarters of an hour ago.'

Mr Knapp, his pale, unpleasant face greasy with excitement, leant forward across the table in the 'office', where the entire gang was assembled.

The faces of the others, who had spent a terrifying night trapped in their own fastness, were haggard, but there was a new light of hope in their eyes.

‘Of course it was,’ said Box testily. I’ve just come in that way. I tell you our young friend Fisher has surpassed himself. At the moment he’s sitting up in the flat waiting for the light, and I have a fancy that it’s going to descend upon him in a blinding flash.’

Perching himself on the edge of the table, he repeated the main substance of the detective’s discourse. Levine began to laugh. Presently Jamieson joined him, and gradually the whole room echoed with their amusement.

Box glanced at his watch.

Knapp,’ he whispered, ‘are the cars ready?’

The little man nodded.

‘All set, boss. There’s the Cadillac and the Hispano. They’ll both beat any police car on the roads.’ He grinned. ‘I’ve got a new set of number-plates for every twenty miles.’

‘Very well, then.’ Box surveyed his forces. ‘Tim, you’ll drive the Cadillac. Jack, are you steady enough to take the Hispano?’ Get into the chauffeur’s uniforms in the office and clear out every scrap of incriminating evidence in the outer room, Look here, Jamieson, you and Levine and Bill had better take the Hispano, and Casson and I will take Thurtle in the Cadillac. We’re making for Lantern Bay, remember. Captain Tomlinson has orders to put out as soon as he gets young Rupert aboard. Then if he should have any idea of double-crossing us, our tracks are covered. We’ll wait for them at Lantern Bay, hand over the prisoner, get the money, and then lie low for a bit. It’ll be worth our while. You two go on ahead and get the cars warmed up.’

As he spoke he moved over to the desk and methodically moved every scrap of paper out of it. Having satisfied himself that there was nothing left in the room which could possibly incriminate any of them, he signalled to Knapp, who brought a duster.

Meanwhile, the others had donned thick wash-leather gloves, and within a few minutes every polished surface of the room had been wiped clear of fingerprints. It was a most methodical, careful piece of work, which any Yard man could scarcely have helped appreciating.

At last everything was ready. Box glanced at his watch. Five minutes to five.

‘I rather fancy we have about half an hour to spare,’ he remarked. ‘Unless—hallo!’

They paused, listening.

Unusual sounds were issuing from the staircase which led down into the tube. The raid was beginning.

Box was very cool, and his blue eyes were dancing. He seemed to be positively enjoying the situation.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘We shall just do it, and in great style.’

He led the way down the staircase into the tube. Casson and Levine brought Thurtle along between them. The old man walked like one in a dream. He seemed to be completely apathetic.

Far away, from both ends of the tube came the hollow sound of voices. Evidently the police were making no secret of their attack, and Box reflected, with a little thrill of amusement, that Fisher had been so certain of success, so convinced that every exit was stopped, that he was exercising hardly any caution.

After moving some thirty yards down the tube, Box led the way through a door in the wall to a second stone staircase. Here the air was close and stifling. He hurried on to a square landing, leading out of which there was a second door.

He pushed this open cautiously, and entered into a small, cupboard-like apartment, where the air was surprisingly fresh. The reason for this was apparent when one glanced up, to find that the cupboard was really the inspection pit of Mr Knapp’s garage, which had been built by the previous tenant by the simple expedient of cutting off the head of the cellar stairs.

Box pulled himself out lightly, and leant back to help Levine hoist up their prisoner. It was not yet quite daylight, and it was still dark in the garage. The big doors had been opened, however, and against the grey patch of light which they framed the big cars loomed out, dark and graceful.

The crooks worked swiftly. As soon as Box’s head appeared above the inspection pit the uniformed figures in the drivers’ seats had started their engines, and now Mr Knapp darted forward and opened the Cadillac’s doors. He had been the last man up, and now spoke in a muffled whisper to his leader.

‘Hurry, boss. I heard the trucks moving. I expect they’re using them. It’s going to be a near thing.’

Box chuckled.

‘It’s going to make them very sick,’ he said. ‘We shall wriggle out straight under their noses, net the money, and get away with it.’

He leapt lightly into the back of the car, where Casson had already seated himself with Thurtle beside him.

Mr Knapp settled himself on the floor at their feet.

‘Let her go, Tim.’

Box tapped the glass of the limousine, and the massive figure in the cap nodded.

The great car leapt forward, and Box leant back among the cushions, a smile of complete satisfaction spreading over his face.

His eyes rested idly upon the shoulders of the man who had just brought the car swinging out of the garage at such tremendous speed. As he stared he suddenly noticed something which sent a chill thrill of horror down his spine and started his senses reeling.

Between the back of the chauffeur’s collar and his cap, and lying against the neck which somehow did not look as though it belonged to Tim, was a tiny end of surgical bandage.

The man who drove the car in which he and his prisoner rode so complacently had a wounded shoulder.

With a muttered exclamation Box leant forward and felt for his gun, but at that instant the car came to a sudden stop, its brakes grinding at the sudden impact. Box was thrown forward, and in that moment his chance of escape vanished.

Both doors were pulled open, and armed, uniformed men appeared at each aperture, while from his position of vantage in the driver’s seat Bob Fisher turned round, smiling as he removed his cap and goggles.

The Hispano had been pulled up the same way a little farther down the road, and the grinning young detective who had taken Jack Simmons’ place climbed out into the road, a pardonable expression of delight upon his face.

The round-up was complete, neat, and precise in every detail. The hidden police trap had swept down upon the cars at the moment their drivers had brought them to a standstill.

Joseph Thurtle, alone unperturbed among the wrestling throng, permitted himself to be led quietly into a police car and driven, this time without adventure, to Scotland Yard.

The others put up more of a fight. They were completely unprepared for the attack, and no match for the myriad police who surged down upon them.

It was some time later when George Box was being driven in his own car to headquarters, with Fisher seated on one side of him and Davidson on the

other, that the slightly puzzled expression returned to his mild blue eyes.

‘I don’t bear any grudge against you, Fisher,’ he said affably. ‘This is first blood to you. But you haven’t done with me yet by any means. You and I will be up against each other again before long. You laid a trap, and I fell into it. I thought you underestimated my intelligence; as it happens, I underestimated yours. But what I want to know is this: How did you spot me? When did you realise I wasn’t quite the innocent little friend who had rung you up to show you his funny flat?’

‘You’re under arrest, my lad. You take my advice and keep quiet,’ said Inspector Davidson.

Box shook his head.

‘Not at all,’ he said, ‘I’m naturally curious. After all, Inspector Bob Fisher, I think you owe it me.’

Fisher turned, and for a moment his shrewd grey eyes met those of the crook.

‘Two little incidents,’ he said, ‘and one rather striking corroboration of the suspicion planted in my mind. When I looked over your entertaining flat, at your own invitation, mark you, you told me that you had only been in the place five or six hours. And yet every ashtray in the flat was filled with cigarette stubs. My naturally inquiring mind compelled me to have a look at them. They were all of your own particular brand, with the tips discoloured. You’re a very wet smoker, Box. Perhaps that’s why you only smoke them half-way through?

‘Of course, that was a very small point, but it did just occur to me that no human being could have smoked so much in a mere afternoon. That put me on my guard.

Then, when the young lady made her sudden and startling appearance, I caught a glimpse of your face. I expected you to be astounded, bewildered —anything. And yet I saw none of these in your face. You were angry; lividly furious. At the time I didn’t quite understand.’

Box laughed unpleasantly.

‘You’re a brighter little ’tec than I thought,’ he said. ‘Anything else? I’m afraid it doesn’t strike me as being very conclusive so far.’

Fisher grinned.

‘It was your generosity, my dear fellow, which undid you in the end,’ he said. ‘I think I told you that in the fracas in the mews one of my assailants slipped his jacket. That jacket had a tailor’s label with his client’s name

neatly written inside. Do you give all your old clothes away to your assistants?'

Box swore softly under his breath.

'I told him to take it out,' he said.

Fisher went on:

'Even that wasn't proof,' he said. But I thought I recognised the figure who fired at me through the smoke. I fired back. The bullet passed through the sleeve of his raincoat. When you came into the flat the second time this evening, I noticed you left your raincoat in the hall. I was making up my mind to go and have a look at it when I caught sight of something which rendered that precaution unnecessary. If you will look at the sleeve of your jacket—it's rather high up on the left side nearest Inspector Davidson—see? —a short, grazing burn. When the bullet went through the raincoat it injured the stuff beneath. After that I just took my chance. I outlined a scheme, and you very obligingly fell in with it. I might almost say fell into it. Any more questions?'

Box slumped down further on to the cushions.

'I hand it to you, Fisher,' he said. 'The game is yours.'

Fisher smiled, and the three drove on in silence to the Yard.

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MARGERY ALLINGHAM

Margery Allingham (1904–1966), undoubtedly one of the best-loved ‘Queens of Crime’, remains one of the most popular writers of crime fiction. She was born in Ealing, West London, and, as both her parents were writers and her grandfather an editor, it was not surprising that she should enjoy writing. As young as seven she produced a journal for her family entitled *The Wag-Tale*, which included serial stories, poetry, a recipe and even an advertisement—for ‘sinite of potassium’ …

Allingham’s earliest short story, ‘The Rescue of the Rainclouds’, was published in April 1917 in *Mother and Home*, the sister magazine of *Women’s Weekly*, which was run by her aunt; the author was just thirteen years old. By the time she was seventeen, she had written countless poems as well as several monologues and plays, including a three-act drama, *Dido and Aeneas*, which was performed at King George’s Hall in central London. And the precocious young teenager also completed *Blackkerchief Dick* (1923), a story of pirates in Stuart times, which her father claimed his daughter had been inspired to write by a series of séances.

In 1927, Allingham married Philip Youngman Carter. At around the same time, she resumed her writing career with *The White Cottage Mystery* (1928). This novella was first published as a newspaper serial and, as an innovation in deceit, the solution stands up against other classics of the genre such as Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Given the enormous popularity of crime fiction at the time, it was not surprising that the young writer would next try her hand at a full-length mystery and, in emulation of Dorothy L. Sayers and others, create a ‘great detective to stand alongside Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey and Christie’s Hercule Poirot’. That first book was *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929): Allingham’s sleuth was the dilettante Albert Campion, who may or may not have been a viscount or a baron … or even a King in waiting. Campion would appear in seventeen

novels, numerous short stories and another novella, *The Case of the Late Pig* (1937). At her death, Allingham left an unfinished eighteenth novel, which her husband completed; he would go on to write two more Campion novels and to start a third, which was completed on his death by Mike Ripley, who in turn has written several highly enjoyable Campion novels including *Mr Campion's Mosaic* (2022). While Campion is more than a little Wimseyesque, his manservant has nothing in common with Wimsey's Bunter. The 'large and lugubrious' Magersfontein Lugg is a most original creation, 'graceful as a circus elephant' and owing more to Dickens than Sayers.

As well as the Campion stories, Allingham wrote many other short stories and novellas, as well as a romantic thriller, *The Darings of the Red Rose* (1930), originally published anonymously, and the non-series mystery *Black Plumes* (1940). There is also the trio of thrillers that were originally published as magazine serials under her own name but, when published in book form, were credited to 'Maxwell March', whom Allingham described as 'a first class hack—he makes the cash' and went on to note that 'Margery Allingham thinks of her reputation'. That reputation rests not only on her ability, like Dickens, to create truly memorable characters and to capture the atmosphere of a place, but also on her considerable strengths as a writer and her clever and playful approach to the construction of a mystery. Indeed, Allingham could turn her hand to almost anything. In 1936, she was approached by the film company Gainsborough Pictures to adapt E. Philips Oppenheim's novel *The Strange Boarders of Palace Crescent* (1934), but the job went instead to the established screenwriter A. R. Rawlinson; whether Allingham turned down Gainsborough or vice versa is unclear, but either way the film was not a success.

Allingham's best book may be her least well-known. Written at the request of an American friend, *The Oaken Heart* (1941) is set in the Essex village of Auburn which, even when the book was published, was readily identifiable as a lightly disguised version of Tolleshunt D'Arcy, the village where Allingham made her home after leaving London with her husband. Her only published book-length work of non-fiction, it was acclaimed by contemporary critics as an outstanding portrait of how the inhabitants of a typical English village reacted to events, from the slow burning summer before the Munich Conference through to the arrival of evacuees and the coming of the Luftwaffe. After the Second World War, Allingham would

play her part in healing Tolleshunt D'Arcy and she would go on to write more novels, including the book that many consider to be her best, the Campion thriller *Tiger in the Smoke* (1952), and the final novel to be published in her lifetime, *The Mind Readers* (1965), which sadly reads more like a thriller for younger readers than any of her other books..

'The Mystery Man of Soho' was first published in *The Thriller* magazine in April 1933. A version of the novella, heavily edited by Margery Allingham's sister after the author's death, was included in *The Allingham Minibus* (1973) as 'A Quarter of a Million'. I am grateful to Barrie Pike, the authority on Allingham's life and work, for providing a copy of the original printing.

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THE COMMOTION AT SAN GIOVANNI

George Bellairs

When Giuseppe Pozzi was appointed mayor of the small commune of San Giovanni, perched high on its rocky ledge in the canton of Ticino, Switzerland, he made up his mind to give his village and himself a place in the sun, and set about finding ways of doing it. He read the brief history of the place over and over again in the vain hope of finding some celebrity to whom to erect a statue before which hero-worshippers could call to prostrate themselves. He was about to give up the matter in despair and remove himself and his large, obstreperous family to another place more in keeping with his ambitions, when he remembered the picture in the parish church.

The church was a huge place considering the small, scattered and indolent flock which it accommodated, but it had a strange and picturesque history. It contained the tomb of a bishop who had been unfrocked by Rome for heresy, but whom the natives of the San Giovanni valley had received in their midst with pride, allowed to minister to them for twelve years and then buried beneath the pulpit of the large church they had built for him, with a figure of himself, one hand raised with benedictive fingers projecting and the other firmly grasping his pastoral crook in defiance of his official superiors. In view of the fact that ex-Bishop Erennio had repented and been received back into the arms of his mother church on his death-bed, his bones were allowed to rest in peace in the midst of his now orthodox flock and temple. The turncoat cleric and his tomb, however, were small fry to Signor Pozzi compared with The Picture.

Tired of heating, lighting and cleaning the great building after the death of its founder, the survivors had solved their problem by dividing it in two by means of a thick screen of white plaster, pierced by a huge gap like a barn-door to give it the semblance of a rood screen rather than a blank wall.

Some skilled artist of the Milanese school had painted frescoes on the bare partition and these were known as The Picture by generations of natives of the district. The main group depicted San Rocco, patron saint of the church, with his clothes decently raised to exhibit a series of vivid dog-bites on his lower limbs, due, it was held, to the heathen whom he tried to convert making a martyr of him by urging their savage hounds to worry him. Around the saint, according to the painting, slunk the curs, snapping and showing their teeth, while he, good man, suffered their assaults with equanimity, due to his close attention to the hosts of angels that soared around his head. The work was well done, and the unknown artist had certainly conveyed the horrors of a dog-fight with telling realism.

But that was not enough by half for the energetic mayor. Suddenly professing a knowledge of art he told Father Gasser, the priest, one Sunday after Mass that he was sure The Picture was an undiscovered masterpiece by Leonardo himself. *Il rettore* showed little enthusiasm. He was a good priest, more concerned with energetic work among his garlic-smelling flock than on canvas or walls, but Mr McWhinnie, the topographer, who called on the mayor a few weeks later in connection with the revision of his Guide to the Playground of Europe, grew very excited when shown The Picture and emphatically assured concerning its origins. He made a note in his little book, remarking at the same time on a statue of the Virgin in black marble which was, in his opinion, unique and well done.

In due course, McWhinnie’s famous Guide appeared in its twenty-first edition, and in it the village of San Giovanni became famous overnight. In spite of the fact that, owing to the publicity, a number of experts shook indignant heads over the masterpiece and asserted that it in no way resembled anything like a work by Leonardo, and in spite of the infuriated letters to the Press from colonels in the Southern States and British possessions overseas to the effect that a black Virgin was preposterous, British, American and German tourists pinned their faith in McWhinnie, halted in their travels to climb uphill to the church and make notes or ticks in their diaries concerning the exhibits found there.

So many came that in the end a funicular was constructed to bear them aloft to the village, tucked away on its ledge above the main line. Three large hotels, ten pensions, a fine communal building, with a sumptuous mayor’s office and an enquiry bureau, and fourteen postcard and souvenir shops followed rapidly. One could also buy small plaques bearing the figure

of San Rocco and a dog, to nail on one's walking stick as evidence of a visit to the shrine. Travel agencies conducted parties there in rapid succession and a special summer office of somebody's reiseburo was established to cope with the business of marshalling visitors and collecting their fares and entrance fees.

Matters progressed prosperously for Signor Pozzi and the village for a while—until Father Gasser grew tired of the whole business. He complained to his bishop that the spiritual life of the place had suffered through its popularity and the easy money which flowed into it. The people no longer showed the piety of those who depend on the land and the vagaries of nature for a living. Also, the church was a place of worship no more, but a museum round which people prowled and stared, forgetful of its supreme purpose. The bishop smiled urbanely and told Father Gasser to be patient and that prosperity meant a happy and successful parish. As for the churches' supreme function, was it not, said his grace, uncrossing his fat calves and ringing a small handbell which denoted the end of the audience, was it not to bring as many people into the fold as possible, and who knew that by attracting the curious to its treasures, it might not thereby turn idle sightseeing into true and burning faith?

The parson from San Giovanni went on his way sad at heart, and, not having been invited to share his grace's excellent lunch, seated himself beneath the shade of a walnut tree and dined on dry bread and salami. Feeding the birds which gathered around on pellets of bread and occasional morsels of sausage, he ruminated and grew more and more depressed, for he knew that the prosperity and increasing paganism of his flock were based on a great hoax, and he didn't like it.

Father Gasser was not a man who deserted his church when not officiating in it. When not visiting his scattered flock or teaching in the little school he loved to potter about the ancient buildings, skilfully handling hammers and chisels or even a plasterer's trowel or a paintbrush when necessary. The travel bureau's growing parties continually disturbed the quiet meditations and work he once enjoyed in his church, life became less happy for him, and his nerves grew frayed in consequence. He endeavoured to establish a timetable whereby the trippers should arrive at fixed hours and leave the rest of the time for him to use the church as he liked. Signori Pozzi and the travel agent, however, pointed out that the proposal cramped their activities and limited the wealth of the village. Asserting that the

picture was the property, not of one small parish church, but of the whole world, the publicity experts threatened the Padre with dire consequences if any restrictions were imposed. So parties continued to arrive, chattering, tramping, laughing and mauling the furniture and sacred articles of the church.

Father Gasser had, of course, posted the official notice in the porch refusing admittance to ladies who arrived without headgear, or clad in frocks or trousers which, lacking in material, decency or respect might be likely to promote concupiscence in holy places. This caused more commotion and entertainment, for many female trampers found their plus-fours or shorts disqualifying them from viewing the objects which they had either toiled uphill for an hour or paid Swiss francs 1.50 on the funicular to see. The half-clad visitors usually treated the quaint English and French of the notice, or the warning itself, as a joke and, borrowing the hats and coats of any available men, convened the visit into a parade of half-clad males and ragamuffin females. One enterprising native of the village solved the problem for women clad in trousers by loaning for fifty centimes a kind of apron which gave them the appearance of wearing their abandoned skirts once more.

The main cause of Father Gasser's annoyance, however, was that Mass and other offices did not deter the travel bureau's clients, who then commenced tiptoed itineraries, punctuated by creaking of shoes or the clank of nailed boots and the stage whispers of guides. Furthermore, the pious, who in time of trouble were in the habit of making a tour of side-chapels and images invoking aid from the saints, would often, on opening their eyes, find themselves part of, or an object of interest to, a motley crew of sightseers, and flee in distress to their homes. The priest became small fry in the face of formidable vested interests, and his impotence drove him to desperation.

One morning, as he was actually in the process of creating the Body of God before a small crowd of the faithful, he was distracted by conversations loudly carried on in the adjacent side-chapel. The travel agent himself was conducting a party in this case, and one member, a pawnbroker from Blackpool, had asked him to change a pound note into francs. The agent had apparently quoted an unfavourable rate of exchange, for voices were raised in loud argument. The terms given by the banks and in the newspapers of more civilized districts were bandied, and finally the agent's

booming voice was heard declaring that its owner was not a bank, but a tourist agent trying to oblige in a remote spot. Whereat the victim denounced the whole tour as a ramp and grew as black in the face as the marble Virgin herself.

The priest could bear it no more. Reverently finishing his task, he carefully deposited the elements in their proper places and, seizing the only available weapon, the crook of Bishop Erennio, he brandished it wildly, chased the guide and his clients from the church and locked the door. The agent, quaking with temper, at once telephoned the bishop concerning the outrage, and before long two sturdy monks arrived from the valley to remove the pugnacious priest to a retreat for ecclesiastical nervous cases. They found the church locked, however, with loud sounds of knocking echoing through its interior. They implored, threatened, cajoled, requested and coaxed the solitary occupant to let them in, but he continued to hold the fort until dusk. Then he opened the door and surrendered himself. The crowd round the porch surged into the building, and an astonishing sight greeted them. In place of the frescoes a scarred white wall met their eyes! All that remained of the picture was dust and chips of coloured plaster beneath. The priest had chiselled the painting completely away!

Herr Gasser is still in his retreat, and the tourist agent is bankrupt. Signor Pozzi has left the village, for health reasons, for a more salubrious locality, after a party of village notables, somehow getting it into their thick heads that he had caused the downfall of their priest, had wrecked his office. As for the village church of San Giovanni, another minister is there. And if you ever travel on the main line to Italy and notice a village perched high above you, with a pair of rusting lines on which trains run no more emanating upwards from a tumble-down station with a broken clock, you will probably be passing the once famous showplace. The funicular is rotting away and the patient mule is once more the only means of conveyance to the eyrie. The villagers, their homes still full of souvenirs and picture postcards which nobody wants, wait patiently and rather puzzled for the return of prosperity and a new publicity agent. But the main-line trains below rush past without stopping, and only one guidebook makes brief mention of the place, telling the story of a fake picture and a mad priest in three lines of small type.

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GEORGE BELLAIRS

‘George Bellairs’ was the principal pen-name of the writer Harold Blundell. He was born in Heywood, Lancashire on 19 April 1902, the only son of Eleanor Blundell and her husband Thomas, a joiner. He attended Bamford Road Council School and was awarded a scholarship to Heywood Secondary School, where he learned about the Isle of Man from his teacher, Philip Corlett, who had been born on the island. In 1917, Blundell joined the Lancashire and Yorkshire Bank and in 1918 he went to work at the bank’s head office in Manchester. From 1921 to 1932 he worked for the bank in Bury, during which time he gained an honours degree in economics at London University. And on one of his many holidays to the Isle of Man, where he stayed with his former teacher, he met Philip Corlett’s sister-in-law, Gwladys Roberts, whom the quiet banker would go on to marry in April 1930.

After the marriage, Blundell continued his banking career at Manchester until 1937, also working for a spell in London as an inspector, during which time he and Gwladys lived in Reigate, Surrey. Outside banking, Blundell lectured on economics for the Workers’ Educational Association. He also began writing in his spare time, beginning with a light-hearted piece about the history of banking in Manchester, which was broadcast on the BBC’s regional programme in 1938, and he also contributed a longer piece about Lancashire holidaymaking, past and present, which appeared in *The Listener* in the same year. During the Second World War, Blundell was exempt from military service because he was blind in one eye. Instead, he worked as a fire-watcher and, while remaining alert to the risk of an air-raid, he started to write fiction. He sold some short stories and, after a meeting with the legendary bookseller Christina Foyle, a novel. Over the next forty years, he wrote nearly sixty detective mysteries as ‘George

Bellairs', all but one featuring Thomas Littlejohn, a quietly methodical Scotland Yard detective hailing, like Blundell, from Lancashire.

In 1941, the couple returned to Manchester. As well as writing and speaking on crime fiction and France, which he visited often, Blundell played a part in civic life, sitting on the board of Manchester Royal Infirmary and several other local bodies. In the 1940s, in parallel with continuing the career of Thomas Littlejohn, he wrote four crime novels under a second pseudonym, 'Hilary Landon'. Throughout the 1950s, as 'George Bellairs', he contributed a column on France and French cookery to the *Manchester Guardian*, and ad hoc articles appeared in other local and national journals, such as *Wine and Food*, for which he wrote nostalgic pieces like 'Remembered Feasts', 'Food with Father' and 'Rough Epicures', a delightful commentary on the cuisine of his native Lancashire.

In 1957, Blundell was awarded an honorary master's degree by the University of Manchester in recognition of his charitable work and literary accomplishments. After he retired, in 1962, the couple settled permanently in the Isle of Man, which provided the setting for a dozen of the Littlejohn mysteries. Harold Blundell died at his home on 18 April, the day before his eightieth birthday and two years after the publication of his final novel, *An Old Man Dies* (1980).

One of only a handful of short stories by Harold Blundell, 'The Commotion at San Giovanni' was first published in *John o'London's Weekly* on 10 February 1939.

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THE GLASS GRAVESTONE

Joseph Commings

The man standing at the foot of the escalator, wearing the purple turban and the silver-tipped black beard, was Surendra Nath Das. He was a United Nations delegate from India. I walked towards him, the lobby floor under my feet all black and white marble, like a giant checkerboard.

Das seemed to be hesitating. This was the *down* escalator from the mezzanine in the Secretariat. So he wasn't thinking of taking it up. I hadn't expected to see him. I hadn't expected to see anybody except Sir Quiller Selwyn and Senator Banner. Like any other office building, the United Nations Secretariat closed up shop at six. It was now a dark nine p.m.

At the rap of my heels, Das turned. He was a fat-bodied man with a handshake that was moist and flabby. Squinting across the deserted lobby through his glasses with the tortoise-shell rims, he placed me. His brindled beard parted in a grinning grimace. 'How do you do?' He spoke in cultured English in a high piping voice. 'You're—ah—the newspaper reporter.'

'Bob Farragut,' I said with a return grimace. 'Associated Press.' There was a fine distinction and I wanted to keep it. I glanced upward towards the mezzanine with its subdued lights. 'Mr Das, have you seen Sir Quiller?'

'Not yet. I was waiting for him. He sent for me.'

'You?' I wanted to ask more, but there was no time.

Sir Quiller Selwyn appeared at the top of the descending escalator. He was a squat bald-headed man with bushy eyebrows and a taciturn way. Even at this distance I could see a look on his face that I had never seen there before. It was a look of naked alarm.

He didn't seem to see me at all.

'Das!' he cried. 'Have you taken leave of your senses? They're the most deadly—!' He put his feet on the moving steps. 'Wait till I get down there!'

Das and I were standing together. I glanced sideways at him to see how he was taking this severe admonition. Oddly, his coffee-coloured face had turned towards me. His brown eyes looked sensitive and full of hurt.

Yet his tone was calm. ‘I should like to ask you, Mr Farragut, what *you* are doing here.’

‘I—’

There was a sharp sound above us like a pistol shot.

We both looked up at the escalator.

Sir Quiller was now about halfway down, still over twenty feet away from us. I was shocked to see him beginning to crumple over. His hands were half lifted involuntarily towards his head. The most horrifying thing about the man was that his throat, above his stiff white collar, was all a red gash. And blood was already coming from it in bright red spurts.

His throat had been cut!

His body pitched forward on the glittering metal steps, being brought automatically down to where we stood dumbfounded.

At that moment I tried to remember my newspaper training to see *everything*. But there was nothing else—not near him, above him, or around him.

He came rolling off the endless treadmill at our feet, immaculately dressed and thoroughly dead.

Even the blood was beginning to stop pumping out of the slash that had opened his throat from ear to ear.

Das breathed something in his own language.

I bent over Sir Quiller.

‘Look!’ said Das. He was pointing.

Pushed up against the body from behind was an open old-fashioned razor. Its keen blade lay polished and gleaming under the lights.

I straightened up. I didn’t touch anything except the emergency button that stopped the escalator.

‘Get the guard at the door,’ I said to Das.

I didn’t wait to see if he obeyed me or not. I was already running up the stalled steps to the mezzanine.

I encountered nothing on my way up. At the top, I was in a wide corridor flanked by office doors. Straight ahead of me, about two dozen feet away, was an open door with a light showing through. I ran towards it and looked in.

Seated at a desk under the glow of neon tubing was Bernice Harper. She was operating a tri-lingual typewriter. Papers were scattered about her as she worked industriously. But you never bothered to look at papers when you saw Bernice Harper.

Her hair was blonde, light and beautiful, fanning down below her wide clean shoulders. She glanced questioningly up at me with large blue eyes. There was strength in her face, in the large red mouth and in the dimpled chin. But most men looked at her face last. Her body was stronger even than her face. Earthy but never dirty was the way I liked to put it. Yet she disdained plunging necklines. Tonight everything was modestly covered up in a blue taffeta dress that was closed to the frilly throat with platter buttons.

She was Sir Quiller Selwyn's personal secretary.

'Bernice,' I said, slowing down and walking in. 'Promise me. No hysterics.'

'What is it?' She stood up. I couldn't imagine her having hysterics.

'It's Sir Quiller. Gentle girl. He's dead.'

'Dead!' Her face streamed white under the make-up. 'He left this office only a minute ago!'

'Yes. It happened on the escalator.'

'You mean his heart? But he never complained—'

'I can't say for sure just what did happen. I've got to find out. Are you the only one up here?'

'I think—' She paused.

From the dim corridor outside came a mechanical sound. *Spok-spok. Spok-spok.*

We both stared at the door.

A tall, well-built youngish fellow walked in with a limp. Every time he moved his left leg you heard the artificial knee-socket. Jack Croydon was one Anzac who had left a leg in Việt Nam while his volunteer company was fighting Cong guerrillas.

'Hullo!' he said, staring quizzically back at us. 'Am I as frightening as all that?'

Croydon was from Queensland, Australia. He spoke with a burr that was cousin to a Tipperary brogue. And how the women ate it up when he told them about his rugged days on a stock farm before he took himself off to war. He was now a member of the Secretariat.

‘Croydon,’ I said, ‘I’m only one step ahead of the police. They’ll be here in a few minutes. Sir Quiller’s napoo. Dead. His throat’s cut.’

‘Good God!’ said Croydon, limping briskly to Bernice’s side. ‘Did he do it himself?’

I thought about the highly polished razor that had come down the escalator with the body. ‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Bernice, I’ll have to use your phone. I want to get this story in to a rewrite man. This is one scoop I don’t relish.’

‘Of course,’ murmured Bernice.

I dialled and began to talk. Sir Quiller was this month’s President of the Security Council. He had been handling delicate diplomatic secrets and he would be sorely missed.

As I rattled off what few facts I knew into the phone, I saw Croydon rest his tanned hand over Bernice’s in a comforting fashion. I could have kicked myself for being such a slowpoke about doing that myself. Now he had the edge on me. In spite of her generous body, the hand under his was small and fragile. The kind of hand you want to hold. A little girl’s hand. Her feet and ankles were small too.

The look she gave him in return was pure catnip.

I put down the phone. ‘Croydon, have you seen anybody around the escalator?’

‘There’s nobody on this floor but us,’ said Croydon with finality.

‘Why was Sir Quiller meeting Senator Banner?’

‘He never told me,’ said Bernice. ‘He merely asked me to stay and work late. Shouldn’t we—shouldn’t we go down?’

‘You’d better stay put, Bernice,’ said Croydon. ‘A cut throat is a bit nasty. Watch the office. I’ll face it out with Farragut. Come along.’

I followed Croydon and his mechanical leg outside. He closed the door after us.

He caught my arm. ‘This sounds ugly. We must try to spare Bernice all we can.’

‘I’ll go along with that,’ I said.

‘Lord, she’s a handsome girl. Some people in my country would call her a bonzer peach.’

‘They’d call her a peach anywhere,’ I said grudgingly.

‘Do you think I stand half a chance?’ he asked.

He wasn’t really asking me. He was asking himself.

Downstairs again. The first of the police had arrived. I stayed long enough with them to corroborate Surendra Nath Das's story. Then I heard him say: 'If you want me further, I'll be at India House.'

I walked out of the Secretariat lobby with him.

Outside, it was a cold, raw April night, thick with fog. Ceiling zero. It could explain why Senator Banner had not shown up if he was taking a plane in from Washington.

Das melted away towards his parked car.

Mournful foghorns croaked on the East River. I buttoned up my putty-coloured Aquascutum against the mist and walked north on First to catch the bus at 49th Street that would take me across town to Park Avenue and the Waldorf.

The Waldorf lobby was all old rose carpet and tall alabaster marble columns and dignified hush. I could have used some of this kind of luxury. Thick rugs and thick wallets and thick bodies. I walked to the elevator bank. I didn't have to ask where the Selwyns were staying. They had a permanent suite in the Tower.

I rode up to the 33rd floor, went to a door, and bumped a brass knocker.

Moira Selwyn opened the door as if on cue and for a long moment we looked at each other. Her shoulders were set stiffly.

After that tense moment there was a slight thaw. Her smile was as dangerous as thin ice. 'Come in,' she said in clipped British. 'I was expecting you.'

I almost dropped my hat. 'Me?'

'You—or someone like you.'

I was in and she shut the door softly.

'It's about—' I began.

'Something dreadful's happened to my husband. You wouldn't have any other reason to come to me.' There was practically no change in her placid expression. 'How did I know? Call it intuition. Or premonition. Anything you like. I'm strongly psychic.'

'I never believed in it.'

'You don't know enough about women. But, that's to be expected. You're an American. Metaxa?'

'Who?' I said with a start.

While she was speaking she had lit a cigarette. One of those foreign brands. The brittle smile continued, as if she were mocking me. ‘Greek grape brandy.’

I watched her walk across the room to a cut-glass decanter. She was wearing an ashes-of-roses cocktail suit over a foundation that was a corsetiere’s sonnet. Moira was lithe anyway. Her face had those sharp, taut lines that must have made her look boyish in her teens. Her hair was blue-black and cut crisply short like a poodle’s and in one pink earlobe was only one blue chip of an earring. I watched her long legs move provocatively underneath the sheath skirt. And I was incensed at her remark that I didn’t know enough about women.

In her lurked potentialities neither banal nor restrained. Yet, while sexually she had whet many a man’s appetite, I had never heard of any having an affair with her.

She was in her proper setting. On the floor was an all-over carpet of midnight blue and there were chairs with seats of lustrous black satin.

She returned with the decanter and two glasses. The cigarette glowed in her plum-red mouth. Her black and brilliant eyes were half closed in the drifting smoke. At a low, lacquer-black cocktail table she bent over and poured two drinks—sweet, heavy, and dark.

Her moist lips moved slightly round the cigarette as she handed me the Greek brandy. ‘As a race, you’re all so very practical, though when it comes to us—and I mean women—you don’t know beans. An American, my dear, gives more attention to his car than he does to his wife. Reading a newspaper, he’ll stop to ogle a man in a baseball suit before he’ll turn to a picture of a girl showing her legs.’

Sipping her brandy, she walked to a settee in dusky violet, with orange-tan pillows, and sat down with the fluid grace of a mannequin. Every movement she made was deliberately for effect. She attended to the gratification of her senses as carefully as someone else would cultivate a rose garden.

‘What is it you see in *baseball*?’ She crossed her legs. They were long and slim, a golden honey colour in seamless nylons. A thin silver love chain winked roguishly on one slender ankle. Her perfect teeth showed and her ripe-red tongue darted. ‘Nine young morons running around a pasture on a bloody hot afternoon.’

I wanted to make a sneering reply that some of them weren't so young—but she had two strikes on her already. I took brandy to cover my silence. It had a slight resin flavour.

She carefully tapped ash from her cigarette into a bronze tray. 'In most European countries a boy is under the bridge with a girl when he's fifteen. In this country he's still playing baseball at twenty-one.' She looked me over from my Heidelberg haircut to the toes of my oxfords as if trying to commit me to memory. 'I haven't anything personal against you. What do you think of all this? … Stop standing there mum, dear boy, and *say* something.'

I said: 'I think you're an extraordinary woman.'

'Now you're beginning to show some perception.'

'But if this baseball talk got out, you'd be rated as the most unsympathetic woman in America … I'm sorry.'

The smoke of her cigarette was clinging wraithlike to her attractive angular face and to her dark poodle hair. 'Why?'

'Your husband is dead.'

Poised, she sniffed brandy. 'I told you I was expecting dire news.'

'The details are a little grim,' I warned.

'Then don't go into them. It'll be gruesome enough when the police come tramping in. Is this why you came to me so quickly—to prepare me?'

'I wanted to see you first. Sir Quiller knew many diplomatic secrets. He may have shared some with you.'

She tilted her glass. 'You mean my own life may be in danger? You *are* a dear boy … As his wife, I *did* share confidences with him He always thought I was very astute.'

'I'd say so too.' I put down my glass. 'I hate to run. But this'll be a hectic night.'

'Yes,' she said. She didn't stir. 'Shall I see you again?'

'I'm sure of it.'

'Good night.'

I nodded at her and walked towards the suite door, feeling her eyes like ice cubes sliding down my back all the way out.

In a booth I phoned long distance to my pipeline in Washington.

'He hopped off in a copter about three hours ago,' was the reply.

I went out to Lexington Avenue and stopped a taxi and told the cabbie to take me to LaGuardia Airport. Hang the expense. It'd all go on my well-

padded swindle sheet.

The cab crawled over Queensboro Bridge.

At the airfield everything was grounded. ‘Bird-walking weather,’ said one of the loafing pilots.

I meandered out into the soup, the airport lights fuzzy around me. Finally I heard a whirring sound making erratic movements somewhere up above. An invisible aircraft landed out on a strip. Loud voices swirled in on the fog. Heavy footfalls approached on the concrete.

Senator Brooks U. Banner loomed out of the thick brew, coming in on the beam of his own Pittsburgh stogie. He was big and fat, with a rain-barrel figure. His white campaign hat was crammed down on his square head. An old tarp was thrown over his beefy shoulders like a poncho. I stepped out of the weak glow of the landing lights.

I said: ‘Let me introduce myself, Senator. I’m Bob Farragut, the A.P. district man at the U.N.’

Banner stopped dead, peering around like a buffalo making up his mind to charge. And Banner was just as shaggy. ‘Lemme get my bearings, sonny boy. That Gyrene that brought me here in a flying windmill flew by the seat of his pants all the way … How in hell’d you know I was coming?’

‘Right from the Washington grapevine.’

‘Goddammit! I’m supposed to be on a secret mission! Ain’t your stoolies got anything else to do besides tapping my telephones?’

‘I’ve got news for you, Senator. Bad news. You’re too late to meet Sir Quiller. He was killed in the Secretariat at nine o’clock.’

‘Killed!’ He turned so that the murky light fell across his grim jowls for an instant.

‘We don’t know how or why.’

‘I’ll tell you *why* in one word.’ He peered around at the fog-shapes suspiciously. ‘*Spies!*’

Then he didn’t say another word as we ploughed in through the rotunda and out to the ramp to a taxi.

‘The UN,’ said Banner to the driver as he stumbled in. ‘C’mon, bloodhound!’ I followed. We settled back as the cab lurched forward. Banner growled, ‘So they got old Quill! I thought mebbe he’d make news some day by moving into 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister. Now it’s just an obit. Haaak. He phoned me only this morning. Hush-hush secrets have been leaking out to the Commies. Secrets from his files. Rotten

business. I was gonna meet him tonight, cuz he said he'd hand over the beggar that was doing it … Tell me how he got killed.'

By the time we reached the Secretariat, Banner knew as much about it as I did.

There was a corps of police brass on the scene now. The Secretary General was there, pale, but trying not to show his anxiety.

The tarp rustling on his shoulders, Banner lumbered over to the Secretary General, sweeping off his hat to reveal a mop of grizzled hair. They talked quietly for a few minutes. Banner's ruddy face was even grimmer as he turned back to me.

'No score,' he said. He prowled around the foot of the escalator, went up to the mezzanine, and came down again. 'Shenanigans at the U.N! You were one of the eye-witnesses, Farragut—prob'ly the only reliable one. Where's a quiet place we can talk? Hah? The delegates' lounge!'

I could tell he was quite familiar with the buildings the way he found the right doors. The Conference Building is a low-lying structure catercorner behind the tall glass headstone of the Secretariat. We went in that direction.

Banner was saying: 'The diplomatic game is the toughest in the world. It's the iron claw in the velvet mitt, all right. You gamble millions of lives at every throw of the dice. And if you ever crap out, like old Quill did, you're a dead man.'

By the time we reached the delegates' lounge we were all by ourselves.

We were in a block-long room with slanted glass panelling at the north end of the Conference Building. The lounge was thickly carpeted and stuffed with fan-backed Danish chairs, as well as tables and leather sofas. The chief feature of the room was the Honduras mahogany bar. Overhanging it was a huge relief map of the world, made of Cuban mahogany overlaid on Canadian ash. The only discouraging aspect was that there was no bartender.

'We call this the chicken yard,' I said, thinking of ruffled feathers.

'Waal,' rumbled Banner, 'tonight we're the only two roosters on the manure pile.' He looked thirstily at the bar, then made up his mind. He wore a shabby frockcoat bulging at the pockets. Grubbing into one of the pockets, he dug out a key. 'See if that'll open the likker cabinet.' He tossed it at me.

Miraculously the key fitted.

I placed my arms akimbo on the bar. ‘What’ll it be, Senator? There’s Dutch gin, Polish slivovitz, Mexican tequila, Russian vodka.’

He glided a five-dollar bill across the bar. ‘Stick that in the till and hand out that dimple bottle of Haig & Haig and we’ll shoot the breeze.’

I did. He took his straight. I had soda with mine.

‘Now,’ said Banner in the hush of the deserted lounge, ‘how was it done?’

I’d been doing a lot of thinking about that. ‘Werewolves,’ I said.

Banner smacked his lips. He liked the sound of that word. But he didn’t say anything. He waited for me to continue.

I said: ‘That hard core of Nazis that were left in Germany after the Second World War. They called themselves “Werewolves”. They fought dirty. They’d stretch a thin wire across a country road and when one of our jeeps would whizz by, the wire’d lop the GI’s head off.’

‘Ho!’ said Banner. ‘You’ve been thinking that old Quill was killed on the escalator by the same gimmick. A thin wire stretched across would ketch him just under the chin as he travelled down.’ He frowned. ‘Waal, sir, I hate to throw cold water on you at the start, but there’re too many counts against it. An escalator moves slow—not fast like one of those jeeps in Germany. A wire might’ve given Quill a bad nick and knocked him over backwards. But you told me he fell forward. What’s more, you scooted up that escalator half a minute later and you didn’t encounter any wires. Wires! Judas priest! You saw the condition of his throat. A deep vicious razorlike slash!’

‘But it wasn’t the razor!’

‘No. Not *that* razor. Not the one that was found with him. The coppers told me that there wasn’t a trace of blood or a fingerprint found on it. Why was it there? The killer knew we’d look for a weapon, so as a mocking gesture we were given one.’

‘What else do you think, Senator?’

‘I think that the killer was actually holding the weapon at the instant of the murder. Yaas. That could be.’

‘How so? There was nobody within twenty-five feet of him when he was struck down.’

Banner scowled. ‘Waal mebbe *you* got some explanations. Let’s hear ’em!’

I said carefully: ‘There’s a balcony effect around the escalator on the mezzanine. If somebody were standing on that balcony, we couldn’t see

him from below. Croydon and Bernice were both on the mezzanine. Croydon comes from the wilds of Australia. He'd know more than any of us how to handle a boomerang. Suppose he threw some sort of boomerang at Sir Quiller. It'd return—'

'Wrong!' said Banner with a thump on the leather chair-arm. 'A boomerang'd return to the thrower only if it *missed* its target!'

After a painful pause I said: 'I've wondered about Surendra Nath Das.'

'I've been wondering about him too,' muttered Banner.

'That turban he wears. Do you know that when you unwind one of those turbans they reach six or eight feet?'

Banner howled with glee. 'Now *you're* reaching!'

I felt angry. He was simply playing with me. 'Of course I'm reaching! I'm turning over every possibility to guess what the murder weapon was!'

'Yass?' He was hardly paying attention. 'I know what the weapon is. What I wanna know is—where's it hidden?' His eyes were speculating on the walls.

'You know!'

'It's stlll in the building,' he went on, yammering to himself. 'Everybody that's gone out has had a police shakedown. That gal Bernice and Croydon are still here. So it ain't been spirited out.'

'What's it look like, Senator?'

'You'll see—when we find it.'

Sometimes, in spite of his fame as a murder expert, I wondered if he weren't an old fraud. It could be that he knew no more what it looked like than I did. Yet he was so acute that he'd recognise it for what it was the instant somebody else dug it up.

'Not even a hint?' I coaxed. 'Is it some strange instrument?'

'Strange? No sir. It's a pretty common thing. Though they ain't as common as they once were.'

'That explains a *lot*,' I said sarcastically.

He chuckled, 'Yass. it does, doesn't it? It explains, f'rinstance, that Moira Selwyn, though a logical suspect, couldn't've done it. She's the only one of our li'l group who wasn't here tonight. The guards know who came and went … D'you know,' he said suddenly, 'where Bernice Harper comes from?'

I nodded wearily. 'She was born and brought up in Brooklyn. Lives on Columbia Heights. Why?'

‘This’s one place,’ he said tormentingly, ‘where people come naturally from all parts of the world.’

‘Really?’ I said acidly.

Banner swallowed the last of his whisky. ‘I wanna have a chat with Das. Where’s he at?’

‘I heard him tell the police he’d be at India House.’

Banner struggled up out of his soft leather chair. I put away the bottle, soda, and glasses.

We went back through the quiet, darkened corridors to the lobby of the Secretariat. It was crawling like a bee-hive. Banner took one sour look around. Then he said: ‘They ain’t found it. Why wait? Let’s scram up to 64th Street.

64th Street, just off Fifth Avenue, was a canyon of cold fog. We got out of the cab at India House, stumbled up the front steps and entered the pink marble foyer.

We took the self-service elevator up to the fourth floor where Surendra Nath Das had a temporary office. Under a green-shaded desk lamp we found a lotus-eyed girl in a sari reading a thick book. She smiled at me and said hullo, then looked a little frightened at Banner. He had that effect on some people.

I said: ‘Hullo, Happy.’ I’d got to know her around the U.N. She had told me that the red dot she had on her forehead just over her eyebrows was not a sign of caste. It was a dab of Kumkum, denoting happiness. So I called her Happy. ‘This is Senator Banner.’

Banner, his tarp in fat folds, pushed forward. ‘Lemme see Das.’

‘Yes, sair,’ said Happy obediently. ‘This way, if you please.’

She rapped discreetly on a closed door before opening it. I could see Das’s purple turban and coffee-coloured face and speckled black beard hovering over another desk. He was having a midnight snack of chicken curry, pickled onions in a bottle, fritters, and saké. He half rose at Banner’s blundering entrance.

‘Senator Banner!’

‘Whaddya know, Das! No innerductions needed! Good! If I had more time I’d chin with you about the Crims.’

‘Crims?’

‘Those hereditary criminals in your country, saheeb. They operate by paralysing geese ’n’ sheep before stealing ’em. Interesting rascals. Only there’s the more pressing problem of a man getting his throat slashed on an escalator without a soul being near him.’

‘Ah yes. Sir Quiller.’ Das subsided again to absently spear a pickled onion out of the bottle. ‘Will you sit down, gentlemen?’ he went on in his high piping English.

‘Yass.’ Banner headed for the most comfortable chair. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Happy slip out again. Banner was saying: ‘This here now A.P. feller, Bob Farragut, says both you and he were witnesses to the killing. He says he saw nothing but old Quill. Did you see anything else?’

‘Nothing else,’ answered Das.

‘You *heard* something?’

I stirred uneasily. Yes, we heard something. Something that didn’t fit in at all.

‘Ah yes, Senator,’ said Das. ‘I heard a loud report like a pistol shot. I’m sure Mr Farragut did too.’

‘Wait a minute, saheeb! What businesses have you been in? How qualified are you to judge the sound of a pistol shot?’

‘I come from a family of rich clothing merchants,’ said Das placidly. ‘My father and brothers have shops in New Delhi and on the Chowringhee in Calcutta. But I know firearms, Senator. I’ve been on many a shoot with the Maharajah of Jubbulpore. I’ve used everything from the big bore for tigers to a small automatic. Yet *that* sounded like no calibre I’d ever heard.’

‘Yass,’ muttered Banner, ‘I didn’t think it would … Now, sir! This’s more personal. Old Quill was gonna meet me at the Secretariat tonight. It was gonna be a meeting that’d spell curtains for somebody. What were you doing there?’

Das screwed and closed the lid on the pickled onions bottle. ‘Sir Quiller had sent a message to come and see him. He sounded urgent.’

‘Did he say why?’

‘No, Senator.’

‘Hey? He musta given some indication.’

‘I really—’

I butted in finally. ‘There *was* something. He looked alarmed. As soon as he saw Mr Das he shouted.’

Banner swarmed around in his chair. ‘Shouted what?’

‘How *was* that again?’ I tried to recollect. ‘As well as I can remember— *Das! Have you taken leave of your senses! They’re the most deadly—!* Then he cut himself off and started down. Correct, Mr Das?’

Das was leaning forward at his desk, absorbed in my recitation, grimacing through his thick beard. ‘I’m afraid you are correct, Mr Farragut. But I assure you, Sir Quiller was unduly alarmed. Everything was quite safe. They—’

Banner thumped the desk-top and the china dishes rattled. ‘Lemme be judge of that, Das! What in blue blazes are you talking about?’

Das leaned back and sighed. ‘I’m sure Sir Quiller was referring to what I have in a big satchel in my office at the Secretariat. It’s a pair of king cobras that I brought from India as a good-will gesture. I was going to present them to the Bronx Zoo.’

I wasn’t as bland as he was. ‘King Cobras! The most deadly of all poisonous snakes!’

‘As Sir Quiller feared,’ nodded Das. ‘But gentlemen, the satchel is securely closed with safety catches. They can’t possibly get—’

I turned to look at Banner to see how he was taking all this. There was a silence from his side of the room that was overwhelming. He was sitting there thunderstruck, his jaw unhinged, the stogie having fallen out of his mouth into his vast lap.

Then—

‘Snakes!’ he hollered. ‘Great Caesar’s ghost! We gotta get back there!’

And he went out through the door like a hurricane.

On the wild ride back to the U.N. I got a grim briefing on king cobras.

Their fangs inject a poison so venomous that it can kill a man inside of a few minutes. They have great lashlike bodies, loops of pale olive, that grow to a length of fifteen feet.

What this had to do with the murder of Sir Quiller I couldn’t even grasp. Sir Quiller hadn’t been poisoned. Banner wasn’t explaining. After the king cobra lecture, he spent the rest of the ride chomping the dead stogie and scowling at the back of the cabbie’s neck.

We beat our way out of the fog, came into the court around the great basin of the pool, and, leaving the cab, spun in through the revolving glass doors of the Secretariat.

A big husky Irish cop was standing there with a U.N. guard.

Banner halted and snapped: ‘Has any staff member left?’

The Irish cop gave Banner a half salute. ‘Yes, sir. The young fella with the limp and the girl. Only not together. He left a bit before she did.’

‘And one of ’em,’ said Banner slowly, ‘was carrying a satchel!’

He had a knowing look, as if he meant to amaze everybody with his remarkable powers of second sight.

But he was the one to get surprised.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the cop. ‘The girl was.’

‘The girl!’ Banner, his tarp flapping like the membranous wings of a bat, rocked back on his heels. He’d had a set-back, that was for sure. He braced himself again. ‘You looked inside it, I hope!’

‘I did. I was ordered to search everything. There was two of the foulest divils you ever clapped your eyes on, their bodies all twined up in one another. As soon as they saw me they began to raise up their orange-coloured heads. They had ruddy yella eyes that glowed. Wide awake, they was. I took one good look and I saw all I wanted to see. There was nothing in there but those snakes’ bodies. And I slammed it shut on them again.’

Banner worried his double chins with his fat fingers. ‘Where’d she say she was taking ’em?’

‘To the Bronx Zoo. Where else could you take them? And that’s the same direction I heard her give to the cab driver. There was something else she had him do. She told him to tie that satchel to the outside of the cab before they drove away. Not that I blame her any. I wouldn’t want them divils inside the cab with me neither.’

The U.N. guard nodded solemn agreement. Banner was gone. He was flouncing out into the murky night again with me sticking as close behind him as a splinter in the seat of his pants. I wouldn’t have lost him now—or the story—no matter how hard he tried. He ran down a cab on First Avenue. I reached it in time to hear him bellow: ‘Bronx Zoo! And there’s a sawbuck for you if you break all traffic rules!’

I leaped in behind him. The cab started so fast I almost dislocated my neck.

Banner was howling: ‘For crissakes, never mind that red light! We gotta ketch ’em before they turn those snakes loose!’

The cabbie drove as if he had two maniacs in back—and we weren’t far from it.

The memory of that journey northward remains a blur. I hardly knew where we were. Banner kept peering through the fog-curtained windows and finally announced: ‘Southern Boulevard. We’re tearing past the Zoo now. Turn right, cabbie, at Fordham. We’ll try the Pelham Parkway entrance.’

The cab skidded greasily on wet pavement, and I thought I heard a faint scream as we missed a pedestrian by a hair, then we came to a squealing stop at some mist-enshrouded ornate gates.

Banner flopped out and flung money at the cabbie. ‘You earned it!’ He ran full tilt at the driveway’s iron gates and crashed into them. ‘Locked! … They’re outside somewhere. Foller the railing along, Farragut. Lissen for voices!’

I listened.

The sparse traffic on the Parkway was a muffled whir. We blundered among some bare trees and budding shrubbery. Banner, beside me, hissed and raised his hand.

‘Look! Over on the left! See those shadders!’

Muzzy silhouettes stood close together in the bushes. A man and a woman. There were murmuring sounds as they spoke. The man had taken the satchel.

‘He’s opening it,’ hissed Banner.

I could barely see.

Banner gulped. ‘Suffering sunfish! He’s dumped ’em out on the ground!’

‘The snakes?’

‘What else, you nitwit? We’re almost too late now. We gotta charge in and ketch ’em red-handed. I’ll scare ’em stiff with a Comanche war whoop. And you—wait!’

He let out a howl like a dervish sitting on a hot cook-stove. I felt my skin shrivel.

Then he wallowed forward, shouting: ‘The game’s up!’ or something just as corny.

There was a stir of real agitation from the man and woman.

Banner whirled, pointing. ‘And you, Farragut, dive into that bush! Quick!’

By now I was beginning to have an unreasoning regard for his screwball orders. Tonight we’d all gone mad. I flung myself in a foolhardy dive into the crackling brush.

When I landed I knew how foolhardy.

Smack under me was a thick coil. I supported myself against it with my outstretched hands. It was scaly and long and as thick as my wrist. And as I instinctively grasped it, it began to glide from under my faltering fingers.

Sweat soaked me like a cold shower.

I heard Banner's holler: 'Hold on to it, Farragut! One end's dangerous!'

Both ends were dangerous as far as I was concerned!

I heard the girl scream. There was a thrashing of bodies. Night birds screeched in their vaulted cages. In the distance a restless lion roared.

The coil under my fingers was yanking violently to get free. I fastened myself on to it.

I heard Banner's warning. 'Don't let go, Farragut! Your life depends on it!'

I'd heard of riding a tiger—but never a king cobra.

'Grab hold and *pull*!'

When you face a life span of only a few minutes, you get mighty reckless.

I got my knees braced on the ground underneath me, tightened my grip on the sliding thing, and tugged backwards. It held staunchly, as if the front end of the cobra were snubbed around a post. It was all very unusual. It gave me the courage to yank back again.

It yanked in return—so roughly that I was dragged a few feet through the shrubs.

I dug my heels in hard and hauled away with all my strength. Something came loose.

I toppled over backwards, falling flat on my spine. The coils came hissing through the air, landing in a heap on my chest.

For a moment I didn't breathe, as sweat drenched me.

It lay over me and around me. Gingerly I touched the end. Then I knew I was safe.

It was an incredibly long rawhide whip!

The most fitting place for the last act was the delegates' lounge. Led by the Secretary General and the police inspector, our headliners trooped in—Surendra Nath Das, Bernice Harper, Jack Croydon, and Moira Selwyn.

Banner told them all to be seated, then he scowled around at their faces. 'I got all of you here so that if I say something wrong you can stick in your

two cents. But,' he added ominously, 'I don't expect any interruptions.'

Stretched out full length on the immaculate carpeting was the whip. It had a shortish handle, a long trunk about two inches thick, which gradually tapered to a mere ribbon at the end. A good twenty-five feet in all.

'That,' said Banner, pointing, 'is called, among other things, a Spanish bull whip.' He paused. 'There was a wunnerful old movie. Old Doug Fairbanks in *Don Q, Son of Zorro*.' For a moment his frosty blue eyes had a far-away look of nostalgia. Overcome by memory, he bleated: 'Why ain't they making pitchers like *that* any more? … Haaak! Waal, in that whizbang movie Fairbanks used a whip like this 'un. With it he could snuff out burning candles without disturbing the wick, or flick seegars outta a stooge's mouth. In the Old West, bullwhackers could cut a notch in a maverick's ear at twenty paces, or snap a bandana outta a man's hip pocket and still leave the seat of the pants. What I'm driving at is that there's no dispute about how skilful a man can become in using one of these bullwhacks.'

He stopped and stared at the faces.

'They're not used in this country much any more, 'cept at Wild West shows. But there's another place as woolly as our West ever was. Right now! I kinda forgot to tell you, accidentally on purpose, that this's also called an Australian stock whip. And a stock farm is just another way of saying a cattle ranch!'

Everybody involuntarily glanced at Jack Croydon. It was then that I saw that two cops had come in to stand behind his chair. Yet he was sitting there, his mechanical leg stretched out comfortably in front of him, taking it all in as if it were being put on for his amusement. As cool a cuss as I've ever seen.

Banner's buzzsaw voice droned into the silence. 'Only one of us, y'see, has had the background to be able to use this thing. Now you say, as vicious as a whip of this sort is, it couldn't've sliced a man's throat as if with a razor. True. But lookit the thin end! A piece of steel, about three inches long, honed razor-sharp on both sides, has been fastened to the end of the whip. With the deadly accuracy of long practice, you could slash a man's throat while standing twenty-five feet away from him. It could be all over in an instant. And the only clue as to how it was done would be the pistol—like crack of the whip!'

I wondered now why it hadn't occurred to me in the very beginning.

‘Sure,’ said Banner with pure disgust, ‘it was you, Croydon. You were peddling old Quill’s secrets to the Commies. You found out that he was gonna expose your filthy hide. You killed him to prevent exposure. It’s as simple as that!’

Croydon finally spoke. His voice was strong, though he had to clear his throat with a slight cough before he could begin. ‘How would I know what Sir Quiller’s secrets were? How did I know he was going to expose me?’ He looked like a man with an ace up his sleeve.

‘Quit being coy!’ snapped Banner. ‘You’re Moira Selwyn’s lover! Is that blunt enough for you? Hah! That scourges like the whip, don’t it? … Yass, Farragut, are *you* surprised, after the front you saw him putting up with Bernice Harper? Nice diversion. Actually he was smooching after hours with Moira. Moira admitted to you that her hubby confided in her. Poor old Quill didn’t suspect her hand in it at all. What she learned from Quill she passed on to Croydon. *She* knew the secrets—and *she* knew that Quill was gonna jerk the rug from under Croydon tonight. She warned her lover in ample time. No wonder she was expecting bad news about her husband when you showed up at the Waldorf suite!

‘So, knowing the game was up, Croydon had plenty of time to prepare the whip. Carrying it into the building was no trouble. Nobody’d search him. He then stalked Quill, waiting for the opportune moment. It came when Quill was going down the escalator. Croydon was in a perfect position on that balcony facing the escalator, hidden from the sight of anybody below. He trailed out the long whip—then let it fly at Quill’s throat.’

His big hands came together like a thunderclap.

There was a sob. It came from Bernice. I could have knocked out all of Croydon’s teeth then and there for causing Bernice one moment of unhappiness.

Banner considered. ‘Croydon’s pretence with Bernice served its purpose. He hadda get the whip outta the building again, before we found it. This time it wouldn’t be easy. Everybody was being shaken down. Then he remembered Das’s snakes and the fuss Quill’d been kicking up about ’em. I gotta give you credit for that cunning bit, Croydon. You simply put the snake-like whip in with the whiplike snakes. A quick gander into that crawling satchel would only reveal a twisted mass of greenish folds. The cops’d let it pass out the door. Still, you didn’t wanna chance carrying it. You sweet-talked li’l Bernice!’

‘I did it for him,’ she murmured, clutching a handkerchief. ‘But I thought it was only the snakes. He said I ought to bring them up to the Bronx Zoo right away.’

‘What excuse did he give for not bringing ’em by himself?’

‘He said he had to see the curator first about opening the Zoo at that time of night. Naturally he left first and I followed—with the satchel. We met there.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Banner. ‘He also instructed you to have the satchel carted *outside* the cab you took. Y’know why? So the snakes wouldn’t get nice ‘n’ warm in the heated cab. Outside it was cold. The cold’d make the snakes sluggish. They’d be pretty near harmless when he dumped both outta the satchel to get the whip.’

That was right, of course. I’d mentioned how chilly the night was several times.

Banner’s face was grim. ‘The real danger, then, was the whip in Croydon’s hand. That was what was lying along the ground, Farragut. That was what I wanted you to pounce on and hold useless. Cuz if he’d been able to use that on us, we’d’ve been slashed to ribbons. There was a minute there when I thought it was a narrer squeak.’

‘*You* thought it was!’ I exploded.

‘What utter rot!’ said Moira’s clipped voice. Her black brilliant eyes glittered at Banner.

Croydon’s face glowed with anger. ‘It is rot! I left a leg in a rice paddy while fighting those bastards. Do you think I’d turn traitor for them now?’

Banner snapped back: ‘Benedict Arnold almost lost a leg too when he was on our side. That didn’t stop him from ratting out later.’

The Secretary General cut in: ‘The Senator’s logic is irrefutable. Nothing else could have happened.’

‘Take ’em out,’ ordered Banner. ‘Her too. She’s an accessory before the fact. When you get him into court he won’t have one leg to stand on!’

Croydon glared at Banner with cold ferocity.

After they had gone, the Secretary General shook Banner’s hand strongly, not saying anything. He was too sincere for a speech.

Banner said: ‘I’ll leave the legal headache of imprisoning them to you.’

Surendra Nath Das, picking his way out, was murmuring a gem of wisdom from the Code of Manu, the old Hindu law: ‘The house which is cursed by a woman perishes utterly.’

This time I wasn’t such a slowpoke with Bernice. I rested my hand on hers while at the same time trying to look like a sheep dog finding a shorn lamb that had been lost in a snowdrift.

Perhaps as Moira said, I didn’t know much about women. But I was learning.

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JOSEPH COMMINGS

Born in New York in 1913, Joseph Commings is today almost forgotten outside a diminishing circle of aficionados of impossible crime fiction.

After a brief spell as a journalist, Commings began his sporadic and very varied writing career during the Second World War on overseas postings with the US Air Force. Initially, he wrote to entertain his comrades and, on being demobbed, he must have been delighted to find a ready market in the so-called 'pulps' such as *Western Trails*, *Hollywood Detective*, *Mystery Digest* and *Killers Mystery Story Magazine*. His crime fiction is characterised by undeniably improbable situations, unfeasibly trusting witnesses and extraordinarily clever solutions. In one story the murderer might appear to be a vampire and in another a giant, but what truly lifts his work out of the run of the mill is Commings' sense of humour.

Commings' best-known character is Brooks Urban Banner, a Senator in the Democratic party who is also a criminal lawyer and a practising magician. Banner is modelled very much in the style of John Dickson Carr's heroic sleuth Dr Gideon Fell (himself inspired by G. K. Chesterton) and is 'extra large' in every sense: he weighs nearly 300 pounds, has a mop of shaggy white hair and dresses loudly. Fond of tall tales, the Senator claims to have had all manner of careers—including hobo, locksmith and comic-book enthusiast—which provide some of the arcane knowledge that allows him to unravel the baffling mysteries with which he is confronted. While he doesn't appear in any novel-length investigations, there are over thirty Banner short stories. Fifteen of these were gathered together by the late Bob Adey, the authority on impossible crime stories, and form the collection *Banner Deadlines* (Crippen & Landru, 2004); a second volume is forthcoming.

Commings' non-Banner stories—of which there are at least forty, some written under pseudonyms—are mostly mysteries, sometimes with an

unusual setting, but none captures the eccentric genius of the Banner canon. As a writer, Joe Commings is sometimes criticised for an overly frivolous approach to the business of murder. That was of course quite deliberate. In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review*, published in 1941, Commings protested that the vast majority of publishing houses were uninterested in publishing anything humorous and therefore unwilling to accept his 'whimsical wares'. As he was unwilling to write in any another way, his work remained largely confined to the pulps, while a few novel-length manuscripts also failed to find a publisher.

In his fifties, Commings supplemented his income from crime fiction by writing pornographic paperbacks with titles like *Man Eater* (1965), *Operation Aphrodite* (1966) and *Swinging Wives* (1971), as well as a study of sex crimes, whose aim seems to have been titillation more than education. In the early 1970s, Joe Commings suffered a stroke and his writing career came to an end. He moved to a care home in Maryland, where he died in 1992.

'The Glass Gravestone' was first published in *The Saint Magazine* in October 1966.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE CORRIDOR EXPRESS

Victor L. Whitechurch

The following story I am able to chronicle almost in my uncle's own words, and his introduction to it is interesting in detailing some of his peculiar views and methods of action. Let him proceed:

To the eyes of the world, and also in a very strong legal sense, the man who witnesses a crime and conceals all knowledge of it is regarded as an aider and abetter. In the incident I am about to narrate I shall most assuredly pose as such, but as—if published at all—it will be posthumous, I do not care much for that. My hobby in life has been to probe mysteries simply and solely for my private curiosity.

Just as one doctor sometimes watches a 'case' being treated by a less skilful man, knowing all the time that the treatment is wrong, but never for a moment interfering because he will not violate professional etiquette, so I may be said to have watched certain crimes. Only in my case there was not professional etiquette to forbid me disclosing them but only my own private standard of ethics.

I have before said that I am not to be compared with the detective. His business is to reason from effect back to cause, and that strictly in the service of justice. While this method of chronicling mysteries has sometimes been mine, on the other hand I have often begun with the cause and watched the development of the plot until the effect was reached.

As an instance of this I will detail some circumstances which came under my notice concerning a crime which has baffled all investigation hitherto and which, I suppose, is still fresh in the minds of many persons, being of comparatively recent date.

First of all I will begin by showing how the crime appeared to the eye of the public when it was committed. For this purpose I cannot do better than

quote some extracts from the daily papers of the time. Here is the first:

EXTRAORDINARY TRAGEDY ON THE LONDON AND WESTERN RAILWAY.

On the arrival of the London train at Hexter at 2:30 yesterday afternoon a gruesome spectacle was discovered in one of the compartments of a corridor carriage. The carriages on this line are fitted with what are technically known as a ‘clerestory’ roof; that is to say there is a raised portion of the roof running along the centre of the carriage. The lamp in each compartment is situated within this raised portion, being brought down to the level of the other part of the roof.

To the horror of those upon the platform who first saw it, it was apparent as the train came gliding into St Dunstan’s station, Hexter, that a human form was suspended from the lamp in one of the compartments, and closer investigation revealed the fact that the dead body of a man about thirty years of age, whose identity has not yet been established, was indeed hanging by a thin but very strong cord from the lamp in question. It was quickly evident that he had been the victim of foul play.

His feet were tied together with a handkerchief and his hands lashed behind him with a cord, while a wound on his forehead seemed to point to the fact that he had been first struck down and stunned. Death, however, had ensued from strangulation and it was the opinion of a medical man who happened to be on the spot that he must have been suspended for at least half an hour. He was a small, slight man, and though there were several inches of cord between his neck and where it was fastened to the metal bracket of the lamp, his feet were eight or nine inches from the floor of the carriage.
However, the strangest part of the incident remains to be told. There can scarcely be any doubt that an abominable crime has been committed, but, as yet, there is not the slightest clue to the identification of the murderer, although the affair took place by broad daylight, and in a corridor train.

The mystery will become still deeper when the reader is in possession of the following facts: The carriage in which the tragedy took place contained six compartments, which were, of course,

connected with each other by a corridor running along the side in the usual manner. It was in the third of these compartments that the murdered man, who was travelling alone, was found. Immediately upon discovery, not only were all persons prevented from entering the train, but those already in the carriage were made to keep their places until they had been strictly interrogated. All the other compartments were occupied. In the first, a ‘smoker’, were four gentlemen, three of whom had travelled from London, and the fourth had joined the train at Bristwell, the only stopping place *en route*. The next was a ladies’ compartment, occupied by two ladies and some children; then came number three, in which, as we have said, the body was found. In the fourth compartment were a gentleman, his wife and daughter, another lady, and an old clergyman. In the next were a couple of lads and a sailor. In the last there was only one passenger, apparently a commercial traveller.

Now every one of these passengers gives precisely the same story, and that is that not only did they hear nothing and, with the exception of the guard of the train, who once or twice passed through collecting tickets *en route*, no person was seen by any of them to walk down the corridor, nor could he have crawled unnoticed on his hands and knees because the doors leading into the corridor of number one and number four compartments were open all the journey.

How the murderer, therefore, entered and left the third compartment without being observed is a mystery which up to the present time has defied solution; in fact, if it were not for the manner in which the hands of the victim were tied, we should be inclined to look upon this ghastly affair as a suicide. It might be mentioned that the guard of the train states that he saw the murdered man after leaving Bristwell and punched his ticket, and he is perfectly certain that there was no one else with him in the compartment. Robbery does not appear to have been the cause of the crime, for the unfortunate man’s watch and chain were untouched, whilst a considerable number of banknotes, nearly two hundred pounds’ worth, it is said, were recovered from his person.

The next cutting of interest is the report of John Eden, the senior guard of the train, who was interviewed by one of the dailies, and gave his account

of the affair as follows:

‘I was acting as chief guard of the 10:30 a.m. express from London to the West of England on September the ninth. At Pallington, the London terminus, I was busy as usual, seeing to the luggage and trying to answer all the questions that folks put to a guard. Passengers, as a rule, take their seats in the Western Corridor train some little time before she starts, and the carriage in which the murder took place was beginning to fill up when the poor fellow himself came to me on the platform.

‘“Guard,” he says, “I’d like a compartment to myself if you can manage it.”

‘It’s not an unusual question, and so I didn’t think much of it. “Alright, sir,” I answered, “I’ll see what I can do. There’s not a great lot of people going down this time of the year. Jump in here, sir, and I’ll turn the key on you. But I can’t prevent anyone from intruding on you by the door from the corridor.”

‘A guard’s life on board a train is a busy one, and I had plenty to do in my van with sorting of luggage and invoices after it started. About midway between London and Bristwell I walked through the train. The gentleman who had asked me to reserve him a compartment greeted me and thanked me, and told me he was going to Peelmouth. I told him I’d try and see that he was alone right through. There was a ten minutes stop at Bristwell, and I went through the train again very soon afterwards. Sometimes we have a ticket collector on board, but on this particular journey I was acting for him, and so I was able to take note of the most of the passengers. In the carriage where the murder took place they were exactly as described in yesterday’s paper—I’ll swear to that. I was up and down the train once or twice more on the journey, but did not leave my van for some little time before we arrived at Hexter. It was during that time the whole thing must have happened, though how on earth it took place I can’t understand. If the fellow had got in by way of the corridor he must have been seen. He wasn’t under the seat, I’m sure, and if he had been how could he have got out without attracting notice? There was only one other way in which he could have got in, and that was by the other door, from the outside of the carriage, and,

considering we were travelling at over fifty miles an hour, and that it was broad daylight, he couldn't have done it, or he'd have been seen if he tried it. No, the whole thing beats me, and I don't know what to say about it. The only thing I noticed particularly about the poor chap was that he spoke with rather a foreign accent.'

Although every effort was made by the police, and a large reward offered for the apprehension of the murderer, he was never discovered. The case created a peculiar interest at the time because it had previously been thought that when railway engineers had hit upon the corridor system in trains they had put a stop once and for all, so far as such carriages were concerned, to some of the worst crimes perpetrated on the line.

With regard to the murdered man, he was afterwards identified as Heinrich Müller, a confidential foreign correspondence clerk employed at a well-known City house who had lived very quietly at lodgings in Harlesden, close to Willesden Junction.

His landlady stated that for a week or so previous to the fatal day he had seemed rather perturbed in his mind. He had quitted her quite suddenly and without giving notice of his intention to his employers. In fact, if it had not been for the fact that his hands were tied, as mentioned above, and a slight wound on his forehead, it looked very much like a case of suicide. Many believed that this was the solution, saying that the man might easily have bruised his forehead accidentally, and that he might even have managed to tie his hands behind him after suspending himself.

But it was not suicide. I knew that all the time, and now I will solve the puzzle for you.

There is no doubt of one thing. While the Englishman is free to debate on politics and to argue and rave as much as he chooses in Hyde Park or his local debating club, the Continental politician of advanced views is never happy until he has been enrolled into a 'secret society'. Many of these societies are as harmless as newborn lambs. On the other hand, many of them are dangerous—dangerous in many ways, if not to the governments against which their opinions are levelled, at least to themselves. Indeed, it is very ludicrous but I have good reason for making such an assertion because I have been a member of one such society myself. Not that I cared anything for politics or hated any particular tyrant or form of government, but simply

because my insatiable curiosity led me to investigate the methods and members of a secret political society.

The objects of this particular secret society would much amuse you, so gigantic and absurd were they. We undertook the reform of Europe as a whole, but, unfortunately, about the only means we had to employ in bringing about this reform were the passing of resolutions, awful enough in their intention but quite incapable of ever being carried out.

However ridiculous and futile the ends and methods of the society, it possessed a decided element of danger in its constitution. It had to be doing *something*, you see, and so it drew up a terrible code of punishments for those of its members who betrayed their trust in any way. It became far more dangerous to be a member of the society than to be a European monarch, especially as at one period of its existence the original object of its constitution were almost forgotten, so fierce became the lust for 'denouncing' traitors within the camp.

Not content with fixing death as the punishment for treachery of the worst kind, the exact kind of death was sometimes agreed upon, slips of paper containing the words 'knife', 'poison', 'dagger', 'rope', and so on being drawn from a hat. The executioner was also balloted for. I can remember no fewer than four men who lost their lives through being members of this society. One of them had his death announced as 'a bathing fatality', but I had been present when the word 'water' was drawn in connection with his name, and knew better.

Another victim was Heinrich Müller. Disgusted with the society, he had given certain information to the police anonymously, but it was discovered, and it condemned him. At one of the secret meetings, in his absence, the sentence of death was passed and the word 'rope' was drawn from the hat. The lot of executioner fell upon a man named Hans Schmidt, who was more English than German, his mother being of the former nationality and he himself having lived most of his life in England; in fact, outside the society he was known as Henry Smith.

You may imagine, but my interest was very much aroused, and from that moment I lost no effort in tracking Schmidt and his destined victim. A fortnight went by and nothing happened, except that it was evident that Müller had got wind that something was up and was acting on the defensive. Then we had a meeting. Schmidt was asked to report progress but had none to report.

‘You must be quick,’ said the president, ‘for Müller leaves England tomorrow. I have evidence to that effect. He is going to take his passage from Peelmouth to the Cape, and he’ll probably go down there by the 10:30 morning train from Pallington. You must follow him, Schmidt—to the Cape, if necessary—but it will be best if he never leaves England. You understand?’

Schmidt nodded with a ghastly grin, at the same time taking from his pockets a small life-preserver and a coil of strong cord.

Of course I was at Pallington the next morning, and of course I was in disguise. I was the clergyman mentioned as travelling in number four compartment of the fatal carriage, and I’ll tell you what happened.

I saw the guard put Müller into the third compartment and at once put my bag in the fourth, on the corridor side and facing the engine. The next thing I noticed was Schmidt—looking, as he was described, like a commercial traveller—getting into number six and locking the door with a private key. I wondered if he meant to attack his victim before we reached Bristwell; but no, he was evidently doing a little scheming *en route*.

At Bristwell there was a ten minutes stop, and Schmidt left the train. I got out also and kept watch. He sauntered in an aimless manner along the platform but I noticed that he stopped at a door marked ‘Private—Guards and Porters’. On the arrival of the London train at Bristwell there is always a bustle and confusion on the platform, and no one except myself saw Schmidt dart into the little room, glance swiftly round and, satisfied that he was unobserved, take down a guard’s coat and hat that were hanging on a peg inside. He little thought that the short-sighted old clergyman who seemed so intent on studying a timetable hanging on the wall outside by the door saw all this, and watched him hastily tuck his plunder beneath his Inverness cape and return to the train.

I pretty well guessed now what he intended to do, so I took my seat by the corridor again ready to watch events. Once or twice the real guard of the train passed up and down. Then, about three quarters of an hour before we arrived at Hexter, someone came along the corridor. To the ordinary observer it was only the guard again, but his uniform could plainly be distinguished as he walked by. His head reached just over the top of the door and could not be well seen as he passed. However, I noticed that the beard of the real guard was wanting, and I also noticed that his black trousers lacked the fine red piping down them; you see he only had the coat.

By straining my neck against the window on my side looking into the corridor I could just discern the pseudo-guard disappear swiftly into the third compartment, where sat the unsuspecting Heinrich Müller.

It was just about ten minutes before I saw him again, when he came out quietly and retraced his steps along the corridor. I just put my head out of the door and watched him disappear into the last compartment, where, probably, he at once divested himself of coat and cap and hid them in his portmanteau.

Of course, I did not see the actual murder, but one can guess pretty accurately how it was accomplished. Enter the guard! Then a sharp, quick rap on the forehead with a life-preserver before the man had time to think. In another minute his hands and feet are tied; then the murderer mounts the seat, ties his bit of cord to the lamp bracket, makes a large running noose at the end, lifts up the insensible Müller, and thrusts his head through the noose. Schmidt was a powerful fellow, and this would be nothing. And then —the society's sentence has been carried out. That's all!

Personally, I wondered several times afterwards at the clumsiness of the coroner and the investigating police. If they had only thought to inquire of the guard the *exact number of times* he had been through the train and then questioned the passengers how often *they* had noticed him, they might have arrived at a clue. Also, although naturally the theft of the coat at Bristwell was discovered, it was never associated with the crime.

What became of Schmidt? Oh, I think I told you something about a bathing fatality. That was Schmidt—it was in the spring of the following year. The verdict was 'accidentally drowned'. At all events he got his deserts.

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VICTOR L. WHITECHURCH

Victor Lorenzo Whitechurch was born on 12 March 1868 in Norham, a small village in Northumberland. His parents were the Reverend William Whitechurch and his wife Matilda. Victor spent much of his early years in West Sussex, educated at Chichester Grammar School and Chichester Theological College, where he obtained a First Class result in the Universities' preliminary examination of candidates for Holy Orders. In 1891 he became a deacon at St Mary's Church, Reading, and was later ordained as a priest at Banbury in Oxfordshire. From 1891 to 1894 he was curate at Aston Clinton in Buckinghamshire, where aside of his clerical duties he gave talks on subjects like 'Glimpses of Country Life and Character'. His next position was the curacy of All Saints, Harlesden, where he had charge of a Mission Church for the 1,100 railwaymen employed by the London & North-Western Railway at Willesden Junction.

Whitechurch had always been interested in the railways and he became something of an expert, speaking often on 'Railways and Railwaymen' to the Aylesbury branch of the Church of England Temperance Society, and all the while gathering anecdotes that would come in useful when he embarked on a literary career. In 1896, he become senior curate at St Luke's, Maidenhead, and on 27 October that year he married Florence Partridge at St James' Church in Hampton Hill, London. Despite the demands of married life and a clerical career, he found time to pursue his hobby of writing light fiction. Three series of criminous railway stories were published in *Pearson's Weekly*: *Tales of the Rail* (1898), *The Chronicles of Humphrey Judd* (1899) and *The Investigations of Godfrey Page, Railwayac* (1903–4); and other stories featuring his best-known detective Thorpe Hazell, could be found in *The Royal* and *The Strand*. Articles on all manner of subjects—from photography to prisons—appeared in magazines like *Good Words* and *Public Schools Magazine*. He also wrote romantic stories

and fiction for younger readers, including *The Chronicles of Dullminster School* (1901), for *The Boy's Own Paper*. Buoyed by the success of these series he wrote a novel, *The Course of Justice* (1903), a curiously old-fashioned story of squirely tyranny first published as a serial in 1902. Many more would follow. Most are set in or around Chichester, and they include the autobiographical novels *Three Summers* (1915) and *Concerning Himself* (1929). Chichester, in the guise of 'Frattenbury' is also the setting for several crime novels such as *Mixed Relations* (1929) and *The Templeton Case* (1924), in which the city's Dell Quay masquerades as Marsh Quay.

Seven years after arriving at St Luke's, Whitechurch was appointed vicar of the parish of Blewbury in Berkshire. At St Luke's he had been a strong advocate for the Working Men's Club, and on his departure the members presented him with an oak pipe-smoker's cabinet. In rural Blewbury he served as chairman of the local cricket club and belonged to the local association of the Conservative Party. He lectured on church history and campaigned locally on issues like walkers' rights and the value of temperance. Florence gave birth to their only child, Bertha, in May 1904, and Whitechurch continued to write alongside family life and his clerical career. As well as more novels and short stories, he contributed articles on local history to journals like *The Antiquary* and spoke often on church matters.

In 1913, he resigned from St Luke's to become Diocesan Chaplain and secretary of the Church of England Men's Society. A year later, the Bishop of Oxford offered him the living of St Mary's in Aylesbury, the county town of Buckinghamshire, where Florence would serve as a councillor. He was popular with colleagues and churchgoers but persistent poor health forced him to move to a less strenuous role as rector of the parish of Hartwell-with-Stone, not far from St Mary's. In the late 1920s Whitechurch wrote several excellent detective stories including *Shot on the Downs* (1927) and *Murder at the College* (1930), in which a member of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments is murdered while having his lunch. And, as a member of the Detection Club, Whitechurch contributed to their first and best round-robin mystery, *The Floating Admiral* (1931).

In October 1931, as they were both now suffering from poor health, the Whitechurches decided to retire to the south coast of England. Following a seizure, Victor went to stay at the Spa Nursing & Rest Home at Buxton, Derbyshire, where—following a second seizure—he died on the morning of

26 May 1933. It was the day after the publication of his final book, *Mute Witnesses* (1933), a semi-factual chronicle of a fictional Berkshire village. Whitechurch was buried in the old cemetery at Bognor Regis, a short walk from The Halt, the house on Victoria Road to which he and Florence had retired only eighteen months earlier.

‘The Mystery of the Corridor Express’ was published in *Pearson’s Weekly* on 22 April 1899. It is the third in a series of stories featuring the self-styled and determinedly self-serving ‘mystery-grub’ Humphrey Judd, and is unrelated to the similarly titled story ‘The Affair of the Corridor Express’.

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SINISTER SEQUENCE

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PART ONE

THE SINISTER STRANGER

Michael Cronin

It will be agreed that odd things can happen almost anywhere if you're there at the right time. Even in the supposed academic calm of a library. For instance: when a young woman came delicately down the high canyons of the shelved books, looking good enough to stampede a gaggle of bibliophiles of any vintage: octogenarian or under. Or over.

She wore a pale blue linen suit with short sleeves and a pleated skirt that wasted nothing of her slenderness and grace. She carried white gloves and a dark blue and white handbag. What first roused Lanning to her approach was the hesitating tock-tock of her tiny white toeless sandals on the parquet floor; it was so essentially a feminine sound and not often heard at that end of the building.

She was examining each alcove as she passed, and in the alternate shadow and sun between the shelves the afternoon brightness did no injustice to her hair; fair and free, it moved gently with the inquiring turn of her head as she searched.

Her legs were pale brown and fine and might almost have been stockingless except that her sort of girl did not wear that sort of outfit in town without stockings, he was guessing, and he knew he had no business to be guessing.

But it must be admitted that George Edward Lanning abandoned the slight attention he had been giving McKay on Torsional Oscillations without regret and watched her come up to his alcove. And he was telling himself that her gift for movement was an education in itself if you were interested in the theory of stresses and strains: this was the job really working: this was where mechanics became poetry.

She saw that he was alone in his alcove and she passed on. But not before his interested and ungentlemanly examination had noted the anxious look in her eyes: nice wide eyes, dark blue … a firm chin that said ‘no nonsense’, and a full mouth that might be persuaded otherwise if conditions were right.

He pushed McKay to one side and went on staring absently at the vacant space she had so attractively occupied in her passing, and knew that whatever she was looking for it wouldn’t be any bright patter concerning the mechanics of pre-cast concrete as offered by George Lanning.

She had reached the end of the room, just two alcoves behind him, and he found himself listening, regretfully, to the silence that followed when those pretty feet halted. She would now come back and walk out of the library. So George Lanning might as well go back to McKay and his masterly analysis of what makes some buildings stand up and other buildings fall down. Eventually. Which is no way of spending a sunny afternoon.

He shifted his not inconsiderable bulk on the plain wooden chair and pretended he was there to work after all. He lost.

But she didn’t come back. So perhaps she had a taste for the kind of reading provided by the shelves of the lower alcove. Now that was a thought: medieval philosophy and romance languages: the kind of stuff she wouldn’t be able to lift off the shelves without a block and tackle. He tilted his chair and looked round the corner but all he saw was the empty alley between the shelves, streaked with sunshine.

He listened. At first it was nothing more than a faint murmur: a whisper, like careful voices in church before the vicar arrives. From behind him, where she had gone … and there was a man’s voice as well.

The janitor with the blue uniform and the ribbons would love this, but he found this floor normally unprofitable: this was probably the quietest and least frequented part of the whole building.

Apart from the girl the only other visitor in the last 20 minutes had been a young man in green velvet slacks and a tweed jacket. And he was still wherever he had settled himself down at the end.

The voices continued and now one of them was plainly a woman’s voice and it didn’t sound too easy about things; the undertones were becoming unguarded, while the man’s voice rumbled earnestly and quickly, stressing a point that Lanning failed to catch, and he was eavesdropping quite shamelessly by this time.

It was an odd place to pick for a lovers' quarrel, and somehow it didn't sound like one even if the man did appear to be pleading with her and urging on her some matter that she sounded unwilling to accept.

He heard the movement of feet and the scrape of a chair and then, quite clearly, the girl said:

'No—no. I can't! And I won't.'

The man sounded as though trying to quieten her down and all Lanning could hear from him was, 'But, listen, it's utterly stupid.'

'No! Now will you please get out of my way!' She was making little effort now to keep her voice down, she had gone beyond caution. Very soon, if the situation remained, she was probably going to be frightened. And angry.

Quietly Lanning eased himself out of his chair and into the alley. If it was a private fight they could always toss him out.

'Are you going to let me pass?'

This was in a fierce whisper and she meant it, very much indeed. Feet slithered over the floor. There was a faint bump and a sharp muted cry …

Lanning reached the opening. The girl had backed against the shelves and she was holding her handbag to her breast with both hands. Her face was tight with anger and her whole posture was creditably resolute: whatever it was, she wasn't going to do it. And she wasn't yet frightened. The slim young man in the green velvet slacks had his back half turned to Lanning and the opening.

'I must have it!' he said thinly. 'That's what he sent me for!'

She shook her head and the light hair danced. She had gone back as far as she could.

'I don't believe he sent you … I don't believe a word you've said—now I'm going …'

With a deft movement, like a waiter pocketing a tip, the young man slid his hand into his jacket pocket and closed up on the girl. There was more than a subtle hint of menace in the set of his shoulders and the way he balanced himself. It was smooth and effortless. His free hand was reaching for her bag as he moved.

'It's going to be your fault,' he said softly, 'and you won't like it.' She half opened her mouth and her eyes had become suddenly wide and dark and frightened. The scream that was coming was choked in the pad he had whipped over her mouth.

Lanning reached him as the girl twisted and beat at him with her bag. Lanning chopped down hard with the flat of his hand on the arm that held the pad, swung the young man half-clear, and clipped him on the side of the jaw with an automatic right.

The tableau broke up quickly. The air was heavy with the sick-sweet smell of ether. The green velvet slacks slowly folded and slid to the floor. The girl was coughing with her mouth buried in the crook of her arm and her eyes were streaming.

Lanning coaxed her over to one of the tall steel-framed windows and flung it open, which probably infringed a number of library ordinances.

'Get some of that … take it in deep … nice and deep … that's a girl.'

She was trembling inside the support of his arm. She kept a tight hold of that handbag. Her chest lifted and her nostrils were thin and pinched as she drew in the air.

'Better?'

She nodded, eyes closed. He pulled out a handkerchief and put it into her hand.

'Wipe your face or he'll think you're frightened of him.'

'Thank you.' It was a tiny voice now, uncertain of itself. 'I thought I was going to be sick. But I'm not.' She opened her eyes. What she gave him would have been a smile if her mouth had been under control. But at least the intention was there. 'I—I'm better now.'

'Good. Stick near the window. In case you change your mind about being sick.'

Lanning went over to the green trousers, still somnolent in the corner, and hauled him to his feet by the front of his jacket and propped him against the books of medieval philosophy, no fit resting place for a sore head.

Lanning slapped his face. 'Come back to us, son,' he said, and instinctively he had lowered his voice: on the side wall there was an unambiguous notice: SILENCE. He slapped his face again until his head bounced from side to side and a pale puzzled look appeared on his face. His eyes came open.

'That's better,' said Lanning, and shook him ungently. Then over his shoulder to the girl: 'I'll hold him here—you nip down to the floor below and get the boy in uniform—he knows where the phone is.'

The girl moved her hair back from her forehead. She hadn't taken much of the dope and the shock was passing. She didn't move.

‘I don’t think I want to do that … you mean the police?’ She sounded almost scared of being right.

‘Rather. They’ll lap this up.’ The casualty was taking notice of things and not liking them in the least. Lanning held him against the bookshelves. ‘Doesn’t look very tough; you know him?’

She shook her head. Her fingers were busy over the clasp of her bag, opening and snapping it shut. She still hesitated.

‘Do we have to tell the police?’

Lanning stared at her. ‘It’s usual. Why not?’

‘I’d rather leave it as it is … Please. He didn’t hurt me.’

‘I may have it wrong,’ said Lanning, ‘but I know what I saw. And that was dope in that pad.’

Her mouth twisted. ‘I know … and I’m glad you were there. But it’s all right now.’

He looked from her to the man in green trousers: the latter was working tenderly over his jaw with a green silk handkerchief: green appeared to be his operative colour. He had a lot of oiled black hair and a thin face. Wringing wet and with his pockets loaded there was nothing to him; he looked more like a clerk than a bandit.

‘I still think we might all walk downstairs and see what the Law feels about this.’ Lanning scooped up the doped pad from the floor, wrapped it in his handkerchief and put it in his pocket.

‘Please—can’t you forget it?’ She was pleading with him and quite evidently she wanted no more part of the drama.

‘You mean it’s all right with you if some perfectly strange little tick comes up to you in a library and shoves a pad of dope over your face?’

‘I wish I could explain—’

‘It might help.’

The green trousers had begun to sidle along past the books, watching Lanning from under his tumbled hair and with the green handkerchief over his jaw. He was saying precisely nothing.

‘There’s a joke here somewhere, but it misses me. You want me to let him go?’

She nodded. ‘It’s better.’

Lanning lifted his shoulders. Now what can you do with women? Standing upon no order at all the green trousers went up the alley with

commendable alacrity and round the comer, and not once did he look back or wave farewell.

The girl relaxed visibly.

She was going to say something, and then changed her mind.

‘Well, that was that,’ said Lanning. ‘A frolic among the folios. I hope you don’t make a habit of it.’

‘Thank you for being so prompt—it could have been difficult.’ She gave him a very direct look. He had been right about her eyes: deep blue. but with faint violet flecks. Her throat was firm and pale honey, and she was almost herself again.

He grinned down at her. ‘Relax. Any other little errands you have in mind? Let’s move before they throw us out.’

They went through the wicket gate past the card index cabinets where a mousey young lady in a shiny black skirt and a very correct plain white office blouse watched what George Lanning was watching and wondered if she’d ever manage to look that way herself, which, considering the way she was put together, was a profitless speculation.

In the entrance hall beyond the reading rooms they halted on the wide imitation marble steps.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she began. ‘I can’t imagine what you must be thinking.’

‘I’ve been thinking that a cup of tea wouldn’t hurt.’ he said.

‘You have the loveliest ideas.’ There was the suggestion of a dimple in that prettily rounded chin. Elusive and utterly charming. Busts of departed councillors and mayors looked down on her with approval.

Before he reached the swing doors she caught his arm and held him back.

‘Look—don’t you see? In that car?’

Across the sunlit street the car waited, an Austin Princess, expensive and very respectable. The three occupants were watching the front door of the library, and one of them was the little man in the green velvet trousers.

‘This,’ said Lanning, ‘is definitely not funny. A reception committee, no less.’

‘They’re waiting for me.’ She was keeping well away from the doors. ‘I’ve seen that big one in the back seat before. With my brother. I—I don’t want to meet him.’

‘And so you shan’t.’ He took her by the arm and walked her through the hall back beyond the magazine room. ‘There’s always another way out—if

you look for it. Let's look.'

A green baize door said 'Staff Only'. They pushed through into a bare corridor. The clacking of typewriters came from somewhere near at hand. A youth with a pimply face and a ready-made suit one size too large to allow for growth pushed past them with a parcel balanced on his chest. He was whistling 'The Rose of Tralee' with some brightly individual effects.

They turned a corner and through the glass panels of a door they saw the asphalt square of the yard with the concrete slits where the bicycles perched. She blinked as they came out into the strong sun. He still held her arm and she felt as nervous as a pony. A well-bred pony.

'My car's in the side road. You wait behind the yard gate and I'll pick you up.'

'I don't know why you should be doing this …'

He gave her shoulder a brief pat. A fraternal pat. But not too much.

'A bob a job: that's me. You'll better save up.' Lanning the Masterful.

He had left the Allard in the side road, facing the main stream of traffic, so he had to do a long and probably illegal reverse to come back to her: there was no room to turn until he reached the library yard. She slipped in beside him and it will be appreciated that she was the kind of girl whose entry into a low-slung car is a joy to behold, especially if you own the car.

He swung the Allard's rear into the yard before she had shut the door and then pulled out fast down the side road and away from the front of the library. And the Allard's acceleration was quite phenomenal and not in the least silent.

'There was a character on the corner up there,' he said, 'and as soon as he saw me pick up the car he nipped back across the road to the Austin. So I think we'll put on a hurry, just in case.'

She was hugging her bag on her lap; she looked small and rather lost; and more than a little worried; they swept down the road, bumped across a cobbled intersection, and found themselves at the rear of a brewer's yard: one way out and that largely blocked by a truck loading the essential bottled stuff.

Lanning hooted, took the Allard's nearside wheels up on the pavement, and scraped through; some assorted language followed them from a pair of citizens handling the crates and their point of view was understandable. Beer is beer.

‘Damn,’ said Lanning. There was a left-handed turn and it was going the wrong way. ‘We’re running round three sides of a square. If they’re smart and know their way about they can block our exit. What then? Do we fight them to the death?’

He took off the pressure. They were running between shabby high hoardings. The road widened a little in front of a gaunt warehouse. An elderly suicidal citizen on a cycle with a bag of newspapers wobbled in front of the Allard’s bonnet. The road straightened. Lanning swore to himself, and avoided the cyclist, but only just; the cyclist swore as well.

‘I can’t think,’ she whispered distractedly. ‘Perhaps you’d better let me get out — I can hide somewhere here until they’ve gone … they don’t want you—and you’ve done more than I had the right to expect. Really, I mean that—please let me out!’

‘That was quite speech,’ he said. ‘I wonder what they want you for? It’s in your bag, isn’t it? So it isn’t the blueprints of the H-bomb’s big brother: that would make a heap of paper. Plans to blow up U.N.O.?’

‘If I told you that I didn’t know what they wanted, would you believe me?’

He slowed the Allard almost to a walking pace. This was important, and the tone of her voice showed that she knew it as well.

‘Of course,’ he said simply.

She opened her bag and showed him a brown envelope, sealed, unaddressed.

‘This is what they want—this is what he was after in the library. And I don’t know what’s inside. I’m supposed to give it to my brother, Gerald. I know it’s important—but I don’t know why.

Fifty yards ahead there was the outlet into the main road again, but this time well down from the library. She snapped the clasp of the bag and looked at him.

He grinned. ‘Your brother’s a luckier man than he knows; I’d like to meet him. And tell him so.’ He slid his cigarette case and matches over to her. ‘Save my life and light yourself one as well, please. The name is Lanning. George Lanning.’

That elusive dimple appeared momentarily. ‘I’m Enid Cockburn.’

‘Now we’re all nice and tidy. Let’s see how smart they are—whoever they are; when I promise a girl a cup of tea, by gad, she gets a cup of tea!’

They nosed cautiously out into the traffic. And there was the Austin waiting for them. Four men in it this time; nondescript and not in the least villainous. The Austin joined the procession and Lanning watched it in his mirror.

‘Not to worry, Miss Cockburn—too many people about for them to try any funny stuff. We’ll just keep rolling and see how it works out. Tell me about your brother and that mysterious packet.’

‘He phoned last night and asked me to bring it up and meet him at the library. We have a cottage in Berkshire and I spend most of my time there … Gerald lives in town.

‘He told me to be careful about the envelope, that it was very important and that I wasn’t to give it to anybody else. I wasn’t really surprised—he keeps pretty quiet about his work and I know a lot of it is, well, secret. He’s a research chemist with Oliphants.

‘He said the library would be convenient because he had to look up some stuff—I’ve met him there before—’

‘—But not like this afternoon? So the little runt in the green pants told you he came from your brother and wanted the envelope and you said, “Not likely”?’

‘A perfect synopsis,’ she agreed, ‘except for your timely arrival. Is—is that car still there?’

‘Yes. They’re keeping their distance; I’d try to shake them off if I thought there was half a chance—but we’d only get ourselves snarled up with buses and things. Now, wait a minute—the Master Brain is simmering: you want to deliver that envelope to your brother and you don’t want any more interference from the posse back there. Right?’

‘Uncle George has had a vision of startling clarity: you give me your brother’s address and I’ll do the job for you while you sit nice and snug somewhere in a teashop eating a strawberry ice. How’s that? No?’

‘No. I couldn’t let you. Thank you—but it wouldn’t do. I mean—’

‘Then I have an even better idea; we’ll do it together. I dazzle myself. Now the essential fact is to shed the unwelcome company in the rear—and circulating around and about is no way to do it. We must use some low cunning.’ He rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully.

‘Low cunning is the answer: they act like a bunch of ham-handed mugs anyway. That’s better: you almost smiled.’

She looked at him sideways and the corners of her mouth lifted. There was nothing wrong with her resilience. It would be nice smile later.

‘Better still,’ he said encouragingly. ‘Go on, break it right open—that’s a girl!’

Then the smile was quite definitely there. And the dimple. The combination was indeed something to see.

‘I’d like to know what you’re really thinking about all this.’ Her eyes were lively.

‘We’ll take that up later,’ he said firmly, ‘once the errand is over and we have our feet under a table. Is this a high-level business fight? I didn’t know Oliphants went in for this stuff.’

‘Neither did I. Gerald has just been to America: some sort of scientific mission … from the hints he’s been dropping I gather the job is frightfully important.’

‘Somebody else evidently thinks so as well. Let’s give them some fun.’

The Allard spurted, crowded the slower traffic, and took some comers in chancy fashion. But the Austin was no wheelbarrow, the advantage didn’t last, and the procession remained in the same order.

‘Listen,’ said Lanning, ‘round the next corner there’s a particularly hideous block where I live: I’m going to stop in a hurry at the lower entrance and we’re going to scamper inside so fast that we won’t cast any shadow. And once we’re inside you’ll have to stick right with me because there won’t be any time to pick flowers.’

‘I’ll be with you—this is the low cunning?’

‘I hope. And whatever you do don’t drop that bag!’

Wiltshire House is ferro-concrete at its worst. Or best. Flat white surfaces, myriads of windows like cells in a honeycomb, sharp, clear angles. And a wide pavement all round.

The Allard was still bouncing on its springs when they surged through the revolving doors, across the hall to back corridors, down a short flight of steps, and then out into the cavernous arc-lit expanse of the underground garage.

‘Hey, Charlie—come here!’ Lanning lifted his voice against the hammering. Charlie emerged from his glass-panelled mousetrap of an office. He had a bush of red hair, the beginnings of a paunch, and wore a black and white check jacket without any buttons.

‘I want to borrow the small van for an hour.’ OK? Pick up my Allard—it’s out in the front. If anyone comes looking for me, you don’t know a thing. Right?’

Charlie looked at the girl and grinned. A volume of a grin. Without offence.

‘Never even heard of you, Mister Lanning.’

The van was a small Ford and a credit to nobody: there was a coil of tow rope, a jack and some large spanners in the back. Lanning borrowed a cap from a peg; it submerged him and was excellent for the purpose.

The van rattled out and into the bright street with Enid Cockburn squatting uncomfortably out of sight in the back. They came round the front of Wiltshire House; the Austin’s driver was alone and he was reading a paper and the passing of the noisy van meant less than nothing to him.

Once they were clear she climbed over the seat and settled beside Lanning; a manoeuvre that was not without interest. George Lanning went on driving. Here was a girl who could clamber out of the back of an old Ford van and look as good as they come. Or better.

‘That was quick,’ she said, ‘and it worked. You have good friends, Mr Lanning.’

‘I go here and there. And it helps. They’ll find Wiltshire House a dead loss. Now what about brother Gerald?’

She gave him the address. Richmond; up near the park gates. The van was hot and smelly and the gearbox had a character all of its own. On the way they stopped and she ’phoned Richmond but got no answer, as expected.

‘I’ve got a key, so we can let ourselves in and I’ll make that tea we’ve been promising ourselves. He probably turned up at the library after we left. I can ring his office and tell him where I am.’ She sounded relieved.

‘The prospect is entrancing,’ said Lanning, and he was by no means looking at or thinking of the scenery. ‘Mission accomplished, more or less.’

It was a large block of flats over the slope where the river bent between the trees below. Each flat was gay with window boxes and bright striped awnings. They abandoned the Ford discreetly under the trees, along with the borrowed cap. The atmosphere was sunny and leisured and expensive.

A small motor-mower phuttered between the flower-beds; a long-legged girl in brief shorts lounged in a deck chair, bouncing the handle of her

racquet on the grass; a cream and green Triumph sports model shimmered in the sun by the hall.

The lift took them up to the second floor. Enid Cockburn said she was glad it was all over. She dug in that precious handbag and found a small ring of keys.

The corridor was cool and quiet and utterly peaceful. This was a place where they charged for service and gave you service; there was a nest of bright spreading flowers in an alcove by the window.

The hall of the flat was small and square and brilliant with the afternoon sun streaming in from the open door beyond.

‘Tea,’ she sighed. ‘Do please go in and make yourself comfortable, Mr Lanning.’

As he went into the sitting-room he was wondering how to get round to the matter of the name ‘George’. Then he was in a pleasant, sun-drenched room with one wide brightly curtained window.

But he wasn’t looking at any of that: he was looking at the man in the dark flannel suit on the chesterfield—he was lying with his head back and eyes closed and his hands hanging loose. He might be drunk. Or asleep. Except that he didn’t seem to be breathing.

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PART TWO

THE SINISTER SUITCASE

Geoffrey Household

When Lanning had taken two swift steps towards the man on the chesterfield he saw that the head which rested so naturally had no back to it, and that the pattern of the supporting cushion was not, as at first he had thought, of red and cream flowers.

He had to remind himself that this was not the first time he had seen a death of brutal untidiness. He assured himself, trying to control an unpleasant feeling of nausea and incompetence, that one shouldn't be so influenced by time and place.

It was absurd to be affected because a sight which you would more or less have taken for granted under enemy artillery fire happened to appear again in the pretentiousness of a slick, suburban flat.

There was every sign that the murderer had cleared off the instant after striking his blow. The weapon had been flung down on the chesterfield. It was a full, stout, quart bottle of light ale. There was a strong suggestion that it had been used in self-defence. for just beneath the dangling fingers of the corpse and half-hidden by his shoe was a .32 pistol.

He went back to the corridor and shut the door of the living-room.

'Could you come?' he asked.

Enid Cockburn appeared instantly, her comb still in her hand, alarmed by the unnatural steadiness of his voice.

'Your brother …' he began.

She rushed past him, opened the door and stopped dead, questioning him with eyes in which relief was the dominant emotion.

'It's not your brother, then,' he said.

'No. It's no one I've ever seen.'

Lanning made for the telephone. He wanted a drink and he wanted the police—large quantities of solid, comforting police. None of your 20-year-old specialists in parking offences, trying to look impassive under father's helmet.

'Not yet,' she begged. 'Let's think for a moment. Please, not yet!'

It was the second time she had prevented him from calling the police. This young woman couldn't be taken on trust at all. Good heavens, and only five minutes ago he hadn't a thought in the world but the alluring line from hip to ankle as blue linen stepped from scarlet car!

Lovely of course she was—but, when you came to think of it, she had shown mighty little evidence of anything else!

All the same it was a clean-cut, spiritual little face. His impulse to hand over responsibility at the earliest possible moment was perhaps a trifle indecent. One needn't drop this once delightful subject with the haste of a tomcat about to be run over by a bus.

'Then we'll have to get it all a bit clearer at once,' he said.

'I'll answer any questions you like.'

'Why did your brother leave this envelope with you in Berkshire?'

'To keep it safe, I suppose.'

'But why with you?' he insisted. 'He could drop it at his bank or pop it into the safe at Oliphants or hide it here. When did he leave it with you?'

'Two days ago.'

'He came down to the cottage just for that?'

'No. At least I don't think so. But he may have done. I've never been good at seeing through him.'

'But you get on well?'

'He's the dearest elder brother anyone could have,' she answered.

He looked at her, so eager and delicate. The brother must surely be a masculine edition of the same build. That made things easier to understand.

'Is he a small man?' Lanning asked.

'Yes. So he would have had no other chance, you see.'

Her frank reply at once won him over. She had missed none of the evidence and was brave enough to admit it. No, Gerald Cockburn would have had no other chance against that hulking tough on the chesterfield—except to suggest a drink, to offer the tray meekly to the sitting man and to strike with all his force when the gun was lowered.

‘And you haven’t any idea why this gang should have taken such risks—holding him here by force, and meanwhile trying to nobble you in a public library?’

‘None. But why don’t we look?’

Why not, indeed? That envelope should certainly be handed to the police intact. But feminine curiosity to know the contents of any sealed envelope couldn’t be long resisted. And that was a handy excuse for his own.

She tore it open. Inside were half a dozen sheets of thick foolscap paper, all blank except for a single remark in bold handwriting upon the outside fold:

The compliments of Gerald Cockburn, and you can go to hell.

‘I told you you would like him,’ she said.

She hadn’t told him anything of the kind. Still, it had perhaps been implied. And she was perfectly right, of course.

‘Where do you suppose he is now?’ he asked.

‘As soon as he … got free, he would have gone to the library to find me.’

‘You know the porter here? Good! Nip down and find out what time your brother left. I promise not to telephone or anything while you’re away. We’re in this together.’

‘In what together?’ he asked himself as soon as she had gone. Gerald Cockburn might be a mere excitable fool where his private emotions were concerned, and perfectly capable of bashing a man unnecessarily over the head. But he didn’t think so.

Cockburn sounded like a cool, sardonic little scientist who would be far too civilised to kill unless he were confident of clearing himself and his motives. Why not leave him to deal with the police, and meanwhile shut up the flat and clear out?

Shut up the flat? But the four chaps in the Austin Princess would return to pick up their man, and very soon. They must reckon that Enid Cockburn and her unknown rescuer would make a dash for her brother’s flat, and that the tough on the chesterfield was now trying to control all three of them with his one gun.

He had decided nothing when Enid returned. It wouldn’t have done him much good if he had.

‘They are in the hall,’ she said. ‘I had no chance to speak to the porter.’

‘Did they see you?’

‘No. I heard the porter tell them that Mr Cockburn was out, but that his sister was upstairs.’

Lanning crossed to the window. There was no balcony, no possible route for escape. Outside, on the carefully mown lawn, was the man in the green velvet slacks; he was watching that window, and their eyes met.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he said. ‘They’ll guess what we’ve done, but it can’t be helped.’

They shut the flat and tiptoed rapidly up the stairs to the top floor.

‘But shouldn’t we have stayed?’ she whispered.

‘Stayed, my foot! If the porter comes up with them they’ll have us run in for murder. And if he doesn’t and they can get in without him they might as well leave three corpses there instead of one.’

Leaning cautiously over the stairwell they heard the party below them ring and knock at the Cockburn flat. Then one of them went down again to the ground floor.

‘As soon as he has talked to green trousers,’ Lanning said, ‘he’ll know that either we’re inside the flat or up the stairs, where we are.’

‘The roof?’ she suggested.

‘A dead end, probably. They’d like nothing better.’

The possibilities tumbled through his mind—clever combinations of lift and stairs, and all hopeless. The lift was slow and open in front.

They heard the steps coming back again from the ground floor.

‘We’ll have to take a chance,’ he said. ‘We can’t be caught here.’

Impulsively he pressed the bell of the nearest flat. He hoped vaguely that the door would be opened by some man of his own type, some sporting-looking chap who would let them in first and listen to their story afterwards. Instead, they found themselves being meticulously examined by a thin and formidable lady in her late seventies with a high collar supporting the lizard-like folds of her mauve and yellow neck.

‘I don’t want to buy anything at all,’ she said.

The interior of the block of flats was cool and silent. He could hear the low voices of the men three floors beneath. At any moment they were going to run up the stairs to make sure that Miss Cockburn and her unknown friend were not lurking on the upper landings.

He heard himself talking. It was amazing what desperation could do.

‘I don’t want to sell you anything,’ he replied. ‘I … I …’ and then, inspired by her preposterous garments, it all leapt into his head. ‘I represent

Messrs Lantille & Strongbow, of Bond Street.'

'Never heard of 'em,' she interrupted.

'You would not have done, madam. Until recently we only served the Court at Brussels. We are making a collection of fashions that would have been worn at the coronation of Queen Victoria—'

'Of His Majesty King Edward VII,' Enid quickly interrupted.

'Of course! And offering free seats for this Coronation to those few people who—er—can supply us with perfect examples of Edwardian—er—garments.'

'Come in, young people.'

'God bless you!' exclaimed Lanning.

The old lady appeared a little hesitant. Messrs Lantille & Strongbow would certainly see that their employees were churchgoers, but such fervent piety seemed out of place.

'People have been so rude to us,' Enid explained.

'In that case,' said the old lady, shutting the door behind them, 'I do not think your firm can have supplied you with proper addresses. My generation may have been decisive, but it was never rude. Come with me, my dear! Young man, you may sit in the dining-room if you wish to smoke, or in the drawing-room if you do not.'

Lanning decided that it would be in character if he showed himself shocked at the idea of smoking on so delicate a mission, and retired to the drawing-room.

Their saviour's flat was evidently one of the cheapest in the block. The so-called drawing-room was about eight feet by ten and looked on to the small central courtyard. There was really no secure place for a long-legged man to sit among so many tiddly bits of furniture, and so many silver-framed photographs of Guards officers in top hats and German princelings in uniform, inscribed to Dear Adela or Mrs Adela Bonday.

He stood looking idly out of the window, and then jumped back to the shelter of the curtain. There were two men on the roof opposite, their heads and shoulders appearing and reappearing as they searched among chimney stacks and tanks.

Two on the roof. At least one must be hanging about at the front door or circling the building. That left only one for duty outside Cockburn's flat.

Enid and Mrs Bonday were in the bedroom, looking at heaven-knew-what treasured finery. Enid's bag with the flat keys in it was on the table in

the hall. Yes, a very neat plan of campaign. Risky, unlikely to fail so long, just so long, as those two determined thugs spent another couple of minutes on the roof.

He tiptoed out of the flat, taking Enid's keys on the way and leaving the door unlocked. Then he strode down the stairs at a normal, careless pace as if he were a respectable tenant from one of the top floors.

Lanning thought it unlikely that the watcher outside Cockburn's flat—unless he wore green velvet trousers—would be sure of his face. The party, after all, had only trailed his car.

Well, it wasn't velvet pants, only a vaguely foreign-looking type who seemed to have bought his revolting clothes in America or Shaftesbury Avenue. He looked at Lanning suspiciously and made as if to bar the landing, but hesitated.

Lanning went straight and savagely for his throat, for he couldn't risk noise or a rough-house. The man, panic-stricken, tore at his hands and then folded up. Lanning unlocked the door of the flat and heaved him inside, praying that he had left him something to breathe with and the ability to do it.

Speed. That was the essential. Speed enough to be ready for the other two who might be already on their way down. He deposited the gentleman he had reluctantly strangled on Cockburn's bed.

And now—blast the fellow!—he was very much coming round after all. It was so difficult to keep a healthy man quietly ticking over on the ice unless you came out armed with pads of ether or something.

He frantically grabbed Cockburn's poker from the living-room, wrapped a sock round it and gave the chap a hearty tap on the back of the skull. After that treatment, he oughtn't to be much good for anything for the rest of the week.

He jumped for the flat door and left it tantalisingly ajar. Heavens, the steps were already coming down the stairs. Where to ambush 'em? All right, let it be the kitchen. With the poker in his hand he flattened himself against the wall between corridor and kitchen, facing into the acute angle of the half-open kitchen door.

He heard an astonished exclamation as the two found the flat door open. They closed it carefully.

Number One dashed straight up the passage to the living-room with a gun in his hand. Number Two, more cautious, stopped to investigate the

kitchen.

He didn’t come round the corner, as he should have done, gun first. Lanning struck, the poker and sock making little noise against a hat, and managed to catch him as he fell.

Number One, meanwhile, had caught a glimpse of the corpse in the living-room, and came charging back down the passage, calling for his companion. He stuck his head into the kitchen without any precautions at all—absolutely offered himself to the poker.

So that was that. Three completely unknown criminals (at least, he hoped they were criminals) in a state of very suspended animation.

What to do with them all was a problem. Tying them up was of doubtful value. Could one, anyway, tie up three people with any certainty that one of them wouldn’t get loose? And did it matter? The immediate job was to get Enid and himself off the premises and clear of trouble. After that it was up to Gerald Cockburn and his opponents to explain themselves and their motives to the police.

He contented himself with locking the three in the bathroom, pocketing the two guns and removing their trousers. He also removed the half dozen pairs in Cockburn’s wardrobe. That would mean, at any rate, that the three could not stagger quietly away from the house without drawing attention to themselves.

Carrying a suitcase full of trousers, he ran upstairs again to Mrs Bonday’s flat. He dropped the suitcase on the landing and let himself in. The two ladies were still in the bedroom. At last they came out, Mrs Bonday drying her eyes, and Enid with a brown paper parcel under her arm.

‘Mrs Bonday has been good enough,’ she said, her eyes shining with tenderness, ‘to entrust to Lantille & Strongbow some parts of her original trousseau.’

‘Such happy days,’ Mrs Bonday whispered, excusing herself—and then added fiercely: ‘But times change, and we must change with them. Now, would you care for a cup of tea?’

Enid looked at Lanning for instructions. He gave her full marks. She had made herself so popular that they could stay in the flat as long as might be necessary

‘When we return Mrs Bonday’s things, perhaps,’ he answered very formally. ‘But I fear we have several more calls to make in Richmond.’

Outside the flat he picked up the suitcase and made room for the brown paper parcel.

‘What’s in it?’ he asked.

‘My dear!’ she giggled. ‘She’s lent us a complete set of her 1899 corsets, day and evening. We’ll simply have to send her a seat for the Coronation. But where did you get Gerald’s suitcase?’

‘I’ve been back to the flat. I’ll explain as we go,’ he replied. ‘Now, there’s only one man on duty—green velvet trousers. As I’m a stranger here, he might think up some trick to stop me in the hall.

‘But he can’t possibly stop you. All he can do is to follow you—which he will. Walk into Richmond Park by the main gate. I shan’t be far behind.’

He waited and listened. Green velvet, who had been in the hall, was certainly agitated by the sight of Enid. He dashed up the stairs, found no one outside Cockburn’s flat to whom he could report, and dashed down again.

Lanning, carrying the suitcase, descended to the hall. Enid and her follower had gone on. He was about to walk out through the gardens to the road when a police car drove up and spilt two constables into the block of flats as neatly as a tip-lorry. Responsible-looking men, too. Just the sort he had longed for an hour before.

He waited outside the front door. He heard them tell the porter that they had received a call to the effect that murder had been committed in Mr Gerald Cockburn’s flat. They were also to inquire if Miss Enid Cockburn were there and, if so, to help her in every possible way.

Call from Gerald Cockburn, evidently. He was the only person who could know what had happened in his flat. And he must have given some pretty convincing details.

The porter gasped.

‘That bloke what just went out,’ he said. ‘He’s got Mr Cockburn’s suitcase. Knew I recognised it! And there’s all the rest of Mr Cockburn’s callers! Gawd, what with keepin’ an eye on the furnace and all them delivery boys, I don’t know ’ow many dozen of ’em there was!’

Lanning’s instant reaction was to burst in on the party and tell them all he knew. But what about Enid? Enid alone in Richmond Park, and, behind her, green trousers who had shown already that he would stick at nothing to get that apparently worthless envelope!

If he started up a conversation now, it would be a good quarter of an hour before he could persuade the police that it was urgent to collect Enid.

Explain afterwards. That was the only possible course. The Austin Princess was parked on the drive, facing the right way. It was unlocked. He jumped in and drove for the park gates.

Blast it! An entrancing view of grass and trees and bracken, but no other glimpse of green and no Enid! The police car was a hundred and fifty yards behind and pulling up rapidly. What the devil was he to do? He'd be held as a suspect for days. His story was preposterous—at any rate without the corroboration of Enid and Gerald Cockburn. And where was Enid?

The police car tried to crowd him into the side of the road. An automatic movement. There wasn't any kerb. He roared across the grass, scattering a herd of deer, and into the woodland on his left. The police, taken by surprise and with a ditch to negotiate, were half a minute behind him.

He jumped out, pretended to take to the one open path, dived off it and wriggled back through the bracken under his own car. That was about the one place the police were unlikely to look for him.

For a civil engineer, a dull specialist in strains and stresses, he seemed, he thought, to have developed a lot of imagination in the last couple of hours. It had been the same in the war. Strains and stresses—well, they always produced molecular changes in any material.

The police car drew up alongside his, and the constables plunged into the undergrowth. He wished he could tell them to stop wasting their time and hunt for green velvet trousers.

But perhaps he had exaggerated the danger. It would be difficult for Enid to come to any harm on a fine evening with plenty of people about in the park. She wouldn't be such a fool as to move off into any particularly private place with that man behind her.

Yes, plenty of people. He could hear them gathering round the two cars and speculating on what was up. The police driver was doing his best to keep them back. Had to get out of the car to do it.

Pinch the police car? But probably it would be impossible to reverse in time. He couldn't see a thing from under the Austin, except occasional feet. Join the crowd? But someone would see him squirming out.

He lay still, prickled by sweat and the innumerable points of growing things. Surrey Police, Metropolitan Police. A ring round the copse. A ring

round Richmond Park. And by this time a posse of police at Cockburn's flat, investigating one trousered corpse and three near-corpses trouserless.

The police car drove back to the road, and the crowd lost interest and drifted off. The two constables remained. One of them was away—probably watching the other side of the copse. The other stayed on duty over the Austin. His black boots were occasionally visible.

Then more police arrived, coming on foot from the road. Lanning heard them making a close examination of the car above him and opening the suitcase. The nine pairs of trousers didn't surprise them at all.

He gathered from their conversation that the Cockburn flat had been entered and—as was natural enough—that the murderer of the thug on the chesterfield was presumed to be the same man who had knocked out his three companions and locked them in the bathroom.

The police had taken the three to has hospital. From the scraps which reached him Lanning couldn't tell what their story had been, but it was clear enough that the police didn't believe a lot of it.

He expected that at any moment the car would be driven away from over his head. He also remembered for the first time, with utter horror, that he had two loaded guns in his pocket. That was going to take some explaining in court, especially if the pair of toughs whose property they were denied any knowledge of them.

Meanwhile the police were having fun with the roll of Victorian corsets in brown paper. Judging by the laughter, somebody was trying them on. They were certainly taking their hair down, so there couldn't possibly be any onlookers about.

Dare he risk a break while they were so joyously occupied? It might be worth a try, even if he only had time to get rid of the pistols before he was caught.

The police were round the bonnet of the car. Inch by inch he wriggled himself silently along until his head and shoulders appeared between the back wheels. There was no one about on that side—but very little cover and no chance at all of getting away unseen.

He reached back a hand for a stone which he knew most intimately: it had been digging into his ribs for the last 20 minutes. He rose to his knees and flung it into a holly tree which stood in thick undergrowth some 20 yards to the right of the car. While it was describing its high curve through

the air he fell flat, and prayed that the police's hearing, in spite of the current interest in corsets, would be sharp.

It was. They surrounded that holly tree in a flash. The man they wanted had to be there—for they could be almost certain that he had never had a chance to leave the copse.

Lanning crouched low and managed to reach the open parkland without being seen. They spotted him then all right, but he had a start of nearly 100 yards. It didn't seem to bother them: they just whistled. The whistling seemed to Lanning, as he ran, to be answered from all points of the compass.

His objective was a much larger strip of woodland, distant three minutes' hard sprinting. If he could reach that, at least he could bury the guns. And he might have a chance of escaping altogether, for the sun was setting.

Oh, but it was majestic the way they worked! And of course, when you came to think of it, they would have called up a mounted policeman or two when the job was to run down a fugitive in the park.

He came cantering easily, tittupy-tittup, all beautifully effortless, to cut off Lanning from his wood. Lanning stood still. The game was up. And that blasted cop was simply showing off to his fellows. His whole bearing seemed to be a criticism of more vulgar methods of making arrests.

This was the real stuff, with no unpleasant, shrieking cars. He was smiling tolerantly and haughtily at Lanning and not looking where he was going. And then his horse put its foot in a rabbit hole.

The cop sat up. The horse, aware that it had broken all the rules of decorum instilled into it for the last seven years, bolted. Nor did it approve at all of being chased by a member of that harmless public whom it generally pushed into shape with its well-groomed hinder parts. Still, after 50 yards, it remembered its training—When In Doubt, Stand Still.

Lanning mounted and rode south, parallel to the park boundary. He cantered gently, for the horse was limping badly and ought to have been walked back to stables. But even a gentle canter was enough to make him free of the park. He could go where a car could not, and no man on foot could catch him.

The cops must have thought him the most impudent fugitive from justice that ever was: for, having assured himself that Enid had not gone on in the direction of Kingston or Roehampton, he circled back north—still without seeing a sign or blue linen or green trousers.

It was then decidedly time to go. Another mounted policeman had appeared from Richmond Gate, this time galloping as if he meant business. Neither Lanning nor his mount were up to this wild west stuff, so he put Sidmouth Wood between himself and his pursuer and cut across to the western wall and its sheltering shrubberies. Standing on the saddle, he pulled himself on to the wall and dropped down on to the slope above Sudbrook Park.

He ran down to the Petersham Road, stopping only to bury his two unwanted guns in a molehill. He could not, he knew, be more than three minutes ahead of the police, but that would be enough if he could break contact. They did not know his name, and they couldn't have seen enough of him to broadcast any very clear description.

There was, however, a bit of evidence, which could lead straight to him, and that was the Ford van which he had borrowed from Charlie. It was parked on Richmond Hill. dangerously close to Cockburn's block, but he simply couldn't leave it there until it began to arouse curiosity.

He took a 65 bus as far as The Pigeons and climbed up through the gardens to Richmond Hill. Removing his coat and tie and opening his collar, so that he looked—or hoped he did—like any small businessman taking the air on a warm evening, he reconnoitred the van. Nobody seemed to be taking any interest in it. He made a dash from the gardens to the driving seat, and half an hour later was back at Wiltshire House.

Charlie was in the garage.

'Thanks for the loan, chum,' Lanning said. 'Anybody been inquiring for me?'

'Not personal—like,' Charlie replied. 'Did I know the chap what just came in, they asks. Never seen 'im, I says. Always people poppin' in and out of the garage what ain't got no right, I says.

'But your Allard is still out in front, because I ain't picked it up because a bloke's watchin' of it. Been buyin' a drink after hours? Or didn't 'er 'usband like your face?'

'If she had one, he wouldn't like it a bit.'

'Well, she seemed to. But then she don't know you like I do.'

'She's been here?' he asked, amazed.

''Alf hour ago.'

'Alone?'

‘Little chap with her. Like as two peas they were, except that one’s dark and the other’s been to the ’airdresser.’

‘You haven’t seen a bloke in green trousers, have you?’

‘Not unless you mean the one what was asleep in the back of their taxi,’ Charlie answered.

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PART THREE

THE SINISTER SMILE

Laurence Meynell

Lanning stared at him still goggling a bit with astonishment.

‘This green-trousered character was in the back of the taxi?’ he demanded at last.

‘Well, be reasonable, guv’nor,’ Charlie protested, ‘where’d you expect ’im to be? Sitting on top of the flipping cab?’

Lanning hardly felt equal at the moment to exchanging raillery with Charlie, who in any case was a Cockney past master at the art.

‘And you say he was asleep?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t actually ’ear ’im snore, Mr Lanning, but you can take it from me he wasn’t extra lively anyway. Looked sort of slumped down in the corner and dopey like.’

Dopey like? Doped more probably, Lanning thought, but didn’t say it. Running rapidly in his head over what had happened in the last few hours he came to the not unwarrantable conclusion that things were definitely getting complicated.

‘Well, blow me down,’ he said softly and almost to himself.

Charlie was watching him with some curiosity.

‘Everything seems to be getting a bit sort of het up for you, Mr Lanning,’ he said, ‘if you’ll pardon the expression.’

The expression was not only pardonable, it was hopelessly inadequate.

‘And there’s a gentleman outside watching my Allard?’ he asked.

‘Like a blood’ound; and you’re stretching it a bit when you call ’im a gentleman.’

You’re probably dead right there, Lanning thought. There was just one possible chance, he told himself, casting about in his mind for ways to keep in touch with the fantastic whirl of events which had so suddenly irrupted

into his life—and to keep in touch also, he had to admit, with the disturbing vision in a blue linen suit and pleated shirt who had irrupted with them—just one chance; but even he, with his usual optimism, didn't really think it would come off.

And it didn't.

'This taxi-cab, Charlie,' he asked. 'Being brought up a good little Boy Scout and all that, you noticed the number of it, didn't you?'

'Noticed the number of it?' Charlie's scorn was merited and immense. 'Come off it, Mr Lanning. Why ever should I? If I was to try to notice the number of all the cabs I see in a day I'd go cuckoo.'

The chance hadn't come off.

'Yes, you probably would, Charlie,' Lanning agreed sorrowfully. 'You quite probably would.'

Charlie had started to whistle his favourite tune; an unlikely air it seemed in some ways coming unmelodiously from that snub-nosed, gap-toothed, grimy-handed, tousle-haired Cockney figure, 'Some Enchanted Evening.'

He interrupted it to throw out casually, 'But of course I know the driver.'

Lanning shut his eyes and counted ten. Miracles didn't, couldn't, shouldn't happen: and yet undeniably they sometimes did.

'You OK, Mr Lanning?' Charlie inquired solicitously.

'I'm not absolutely sure,' Lanning replied softly. 'A large and immensely desirable bird has just perched near me and I seem to be on the very point of snaring it. But you never know. It may yet prove a delusion and vanish into thin air.'

'It's the quality of the stuff they sell to the public these days,' Charlie said with decision and sympathy. 'Gin isn't what it used to be, Mr Lanning. Time you get round to seeing large birds perching near you it's getting serious, if you ask me.'

'You say you know the driver of this taxi-cab?' Lanning asked.

'Well, of course I do,' Charlie answered promptly, relieved to get back to prosaic and practical matters. 'Why shouldn't I know 'im? Old Sammy Saunders. Been at the game as long as any of 'em. Started on 'ansom cabs, I shouldn't wonder. Lives just at the back 'ere, well only a few minutes away. I've known Sammy for years.'

'Where does "just at the back" mean, Charlie?'

'14, Chapel Street. Know it?'

Lanning nodded. Chapels, it must be confessed, were things somewhat out of his usual ken: but Chapel Street he knew.

‘Number Fourteen, guvnor. Sammy Saunders. As good a dart thrower as we’ve got in the *Lion*.

‘I shall have to pay a call on Mr Sammy Saunders,’ Lanning announced.

‘Extending the circle of your acquaintances all of a sudden, aren’t you?’ Charlie enquired.

‘I find fresh friends stimulating,’ Lanning confessed, ‘particularly the ones I have made just recently.’

‘What’ll you be doing? Taking the Allard from right under the nose of Mr Inquisitive out there?’

‘No. On the whole, I think not, Charlie. Our inquiring friend seems so interested in the Allard I haven’t the heart to take it away from his gaze. I’m afraid I shall have to borrow the Ford van again.’

‘Borrow it!’ Charlie exclaimed. ‘Blimey, guv’nor, you might as well buy the flipping thing and ’ave done with it.’

When he got to Chapel Street, Lanning drove some little distance past Number Fourteen, parked the Ford van, and came back on foot.

Number Fourteen was like its neighbours, a small late-Victorian house long since made grimy by London soot and in sad need of repair. Small though it was, it served as home for two families. Mr and Mrs Saunders’s stake in it was ‘the downstairs front, the upstairs back and share the kitchen’.

It was Mrs Saunders who came to the door when Lanning knocked. Although she was sixty and tired-looking and had a figure like an untidy sack of potatoes, Lanning turned on all his charm for her. He needed to make friends with the Saunders family.

And when George Edward Lanning turned on his charm for a woman it usually worked, whatever her age or looks. It worked with Mrs Saunders. She smiled back at the pleasant gentleman on her doorstep and thought what a lot of unexpected friends that funny old Sammy of hers did have to be sure.

No. Sammy wasn’t in … not yet. She was getting a bit of something ready for him, though, as she expected him back pretty soon. All hours, this taxi-cab business. Not much good for a man’s stomach really …

Lanning listened sympathetically to the account of Sam’s stomach and eventually withdrew, promising to come again. He went up the street and

waited in the Ford van where he drew the previous day's *Times* crossword from his pocket and sat there idly considering things like 'a beheaded diplomat gets into trouble about a red jewel' and keeping one eye on Number Fourteen all the time.

Sammy came home before long. On foot, so Lanning concluded the taxi-cab lark was finished for the day. Somehow he knew it was Sammy although he had never seen him. A short stumpy figure with the authentic Cockney stamp about it.

Question: Give Sammy time to have his meal and so be sure of tackling a contented man; or risk it and go in at once?

Answer: Go in at once and blow Sammy's stomach. He had no clear idea of what was happening to Enid Cockburn, but he felt in every bone of him that the sooner he found her again and got by her side to help her the better.

'Sam's in now,' Mrs Saunders told him. 'Come in.'

Taxi-cab drivers are men who by and large see a lot of London life; and by the same token one way and another they come in for a lot of questioning. Hence they very soon get chary of any inquisitiveness; and approaches to them must be discreet and disarming.

Lanning disarmed his with the aid of a brand new one pound note and his own inimitable charm … particularly anxious … some friends of his … I heard one of them taken ill … anxious to trace … Charlie at the garage … would be very grateful …

They did the trick, the charm and the one pound note between them. Sammy remembered the job perfectly well, of course …

'Almost the last of the day, Guv'nor. And a lucky one for me. I 'ad to take an old geezer up to Hill Crescent, Richmond. Well, I ask you. Richmond's a long run out really in the general way of things. Still, that was all right. Glad to get the job.

'The only thing with these further-than-usual jobs is are you going to pick up anything to come back with? More often than not you don't. But this afternoon I was lucky, I did. This little party you're talking about.

'Just as I turned into the Petersham Road. Standing there by a tree. Three of 'em. A gentleman and a lady, a bit of a smasher same as you described 'er; and this other cove with them. Sort of holding 'im up they were between them.

‘If it ’ad been later in the evening, and a bit nearer the West End, I’d ’ave said ’e was drunk. But it wasn’t that. ’E’d been took ill. So she said. ‘Drive us to Wiltshire House,’ she said, ’to the garage.’ So I ’ad to smile at that, of course.

‘I’ve known Charlie there for donkey’s years, and I thought, “Charlie, boy, if you’re getting mixed up with this little bit you’re getting out of your class, my lad.” But when we got there she had no more than a word with Charlie and then we were off again.’

‘Where to?’

‘Chelsea, guv’nor: 8, Farley Street. One-way, they’ve just made it; go at the far end and work your way back.’

‘And what happened there?’

‘Nothing happened, guv’nor. There was something on the clock all right by that time, I can tell you; but they got out and settled up and added a bit of something all right for my trouble, and the three of them went into the house, the chap as wasn’t feeling too well being given a hand between them. Looked as though ’e’d gone off to sleep to me.’

‘Well, well, well,’ Lanning said softly after he had digested all this information.

‘’Ope there’s nothing wrong, guv’?’ the good-hearted Sammy said anxiously.

‘I hope so, too,’ Lanning echoed him. ‘I hope so, too,’ and he took his leave.

It was a vain hope and in his heart he knew it. There was plenty wrong somewhere; plenty that was wrong and plenty that was dangerous and Enid Cockburn was in the thick of it. But at least now she wouldn’t be without him at her side much longer. Farley Street was not a long way off and he was going there just as fast as the Ford van would take him.

The traffic was unkind to him and every light that could hold him up did so, added to which when he got to Oakley Street he missed the right turn and had to go round in circles for a bit.

But he found it at last; the name suddenly hit his eye just as he was passing a corner, ‘Farley Street’, and he swung the Ford into it, cutting perilously across the bows of an oncoming taxi-cab. The taxi-cab driver leant out and expressed doubts about the legitimacy of Lanning’s birth, which floated luridly away on the Chelsea air.

Lanning grinned: although satisfied himself about the subject raised by the irate driver he could sympathise with the man for bringing it up … hallo, hallo …

He brought the Ford to an abrupt halt in obedience to the upheld hand of a policeman who had just stepped off the kerb and who stood in front of him, barring his way. Short of deliberately running down the constable or going smash into the back of a parked car there was nothing he could do but stop.

George Edward Lanning was not at all sure that he liked this latest development.

‘Just my luck,’ he muttered desperately to himself. ‘How the blazes have they got on to me?’

The policeman poked his head into the Ford van. He had been in the Metropolitan for 22 years and he was bored with the idiocy habitually displayed by the damn fool general public. Added to which he hated motorists. Added to which his corns hurt.

‘Can’t you read?’ he demanded.

‘Well, just the simple words,’ Lanning said, wondering what it was all about and playing for time.

‘Perhaps the simple words “One Way Street” are too difficult for you?’ So that was it; he remembered that Sammy Saunders had mentioned it; it hadn’t seemed important and it had gone out of his head; what a relief … and yet it would have been better if it had not happened: clearly it would have been better; automatically the constable was noting the number of the car and imprinting on his mind what it and its driver looked like.

The sooner this interlude was over the better, Lanning thought.

‘Officer,’ he said, ‘I am exceedingly sorry. I had no idea that this was a one-way street and I must admit I missed the notice. I certainly shan’t do it again.’

The policeman, in spite of his corns and his dislike of motorists was somewhat mollified.

‘Better take the first to the left and get out of it,’ he advised.

‘I shall do that very thing,’ Lanning agreed courteously and he let in his clutch and moved on extremely grateful that the bobby had not wanted anything more serious.

When he turned the van down the first street on the left and brought it to a halt there he was laughing aloud.

He was thinking that if the traffic-conscious cop had only known about the fun and games at Richmond Park a couple of hours earlier he might have found other things to talk about than one-way streets.

Lanning went back on foot into Farley Street, looked up and down it to assure himself that his friend in blue was not anywhere near, and, reassured on that point, went in search of Number Eight.

It was a tall narrow house that had recently been repainted. Six stone steps led to a basement door, presumably the kitchen; three stone steps led up from street level to the front door.

Lanning stood for a moment looking at it, wondering what new twist or trick this house might bring to him in the sudden rush of extraordinary happenings in which he had been swept up.

It all looked innocuous and straightforward enough, a well-kept London house in a decorous London street; but somehow he mistrusted it. George Edward Lanning was a great man for premonitions and as he stood looking at the front of Number Eight Farley Street a sudden little shiver of apprehension seized him.

For a moment he was afraid; not so much for himself as for Enid Cockburn. He suddenly felt a very strong desire to see her again and to reassure himself with his own eyes that she was safe and sound and as lovely as ever.

Lanning swallowed a bit hard, did his best to put his fears behind him and walked up the three stone steps to the front door of Castle Perilous.

A small notice at the side said ‘Knock and Ring’. Being an obliging type Lanning knocked and rang; twice of each, just to make sure.

There was a long pause, so long a one that he was just beginning to think he would have to do the knock-and-ring act again. Then a tug hooted down the river and simultaneously with the sound the door opened and George Edward Lanning goggled.

She didn’t. She didn’t look as though anything in the wide world would ever make her goggle. She didn’t look like the goggling sort. She was short, five foot three, or maybe half an inch more; she was as blonde as an American magazine cover; and she was lovely. No question about that.

She had it all. Colouring, contours, curves: if a man had imagined an assembly of them to meet his own specific requirements and delights, this —thought Lanning—was just about what he would have ordered. But when he noticed her eyes he sobered up a bit.

Those eyes examined him for a couple of moments, tip to toe, taking him all in. Then she smiled. It was quite a performance that smile. If it hadn't been for her eyes that smile might have done things to George Edward.

'Would you be Mr Lanning?' she inquired.

'Well, more or less,' G.E. admitted.

'Ah, Enid Cockburn spoke about you.'

'Something nice, I hope?'

'But naturally.' The famous smile again. 'I'm afraid Enid's out at the moment. Won't you come in and wait? I'm Cora.'

Just for a moment Lanning hesitated … something was flickering warningly at the back of his mind about spiders and flies.

She stood watching him, smiling again; and in the smiles and in the eyes above it he thought he could detect something mocking, even a little contemptuous.

Hell, Lanning told himself, of course I'll go in; that's what I came here for, isn't it? What's up with me …?

The smile broke into words.

'You seem undecided, Mr Lanning,' she said, 'what's the matter? Do I look a dangerous person to be with for 10 minutes or so?'

'I'll take a chance—Cora,' Lanning said, and she stood on one side to let him go by her into the house. As he passed close to her Lanning's nostrils got a faint whiff of scent; and in the odd way in which the masculine nature acts and reacts he found himself suddenly disturbed by that and by the close animal presence of her.

She took him into what he supposed to be the living-room, although in a way it looked curiously unlived in. Still, there were cigarettes there in a massive silver box, and he thought if he waited a bit she might offer him a drink. He hoped so devoutly. What Lanning could have done to a large whisky and soda at that moment was just nobody's business.

But he had other things than drinks to think about. Going through the narrow, dark hall he had caught sight of something on a table at the end of it. Something white. The white bag he had first noticed in Enid's hands when she came into the library as it now seemed a lifetime ago.

Did a girl go out without her handbag? Lanning asked himself; and immediately the question came back in a more disturbing form—did a girl go out without her handbag if she went out unhurried and unconstrained?

Well, quite possibly she did, George Lanning told George Lanning, don't go alarming yourself, keep calm; but on the other hand quite possibly she didn't.

'Was Enid, Miss Cockburn, all right?' he asked.

She kept a perfectly straight face, but he could swear there was derisive laughter behind those eyes that opened to stare so innocently at him.

'All right? Of course she was all right. People who come here are always all right. We look after them.

I'll bet you do, Lanning thought; aloud he said: 'I noticed her handbag in the hall and I just wondered if she had gone out in hurry or anything.'

Her eyes flickered quickly but unmistakably when the handbag was mentioned; and if he hadn't known it before Lanning was quite sure of it at that moment, there was something wrong somewhere, trouble was lying around in large hunks in that house in Farley Street.

Off stage, in the next room he thought it must be, a telephone started to shrill insistently.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'I won't be a moment.'

She shut the door carefully behind her, so naturally within ten seconds Lanning, an inquisitive soul, had opened it just as carefully, and was out in the narrow hall, as quiet as a mouse and as alert as a cat watching a mouse.

He could just hear her talking in subdued tones in the next room, as he had surmised. This door he dare not open, but he laid his ear against the panel of it and listened.

Even so it was none too easy to distinguish words … a cautious girl our Cora, he thought; shuts the doors and keeps her voice low, all the precautions.

But one sentence he did manage to pick up. What preceded it he could not be sure about; then she laughed. He wouldn't have described it altogether as a friendly or gentle laugh, and she said quite clearly: 'Don't worry, the goods have just arrived and I'm looking after them till you can get back.'

Then after a further mumbled sentence the receiver was replaced and the conversation ended. Lanning withdrew his ear from the door, considering … so he was being looked after until somebody got back; nice to know these things, he assured himself.

Cora having finished with the telephone was obviously doing something in the room and he didn't want to be just outside the door when she came

out. He began to move back along the hall. Opposite the door of the living room was another door and Lanning had a sudden curiosity to know what was behind it.

It occurred very forcibly to him that if Cora was expecting some pals to return shortly his time for exploring the house was limited. And Lanning liked exploring: especially if there was any danger about. He was dead scared all the time: but he liked it. He was made that way.

So he opened the door opposite and tiptoed in. He didn't get far. He stood on the threshold staring. The room was a bedroom. Between the large double bed and the window was a chair. On the chair, tied hand, body and foot to it, just about as thoroughly as a man was ever tied to anything, was Enid Cockburn's brother. Lanning knew who it was, who it must be, at once. Slight, slender and so like his sister there could be no mistake about it.

His mouth was stopped with a savagely cruel contrivance of a gag; and above the gagged mouth his wide staring eyes looked scared to death.

Gerald Cockburn was conscious but only just. He had had about enough and Lanning recognised the symptoms.

'This bird's in pretty bad shape,' he thought, and for an instant was tormented by the sudden arrow of thought—*and what sort of shape is his sister in, I wonder?*

He stepped forward to render help to the trussed man.

'Don't worry about it, Mr Lanning. Stay still, and I mean still; and stay quiet.'

He swung round and she was in the doorway. Cora and her gun.

And she held it like a dame who wouldn't have the slightest hesitation in using it if you gave her only half an excuse.

There are times when a guy has to do a lot of thinking in a very short time. Lanning reckoned this was one of them. So he did his bit of high-speed potted thought and then let his face break into a slow smile.

'Well, well, well,' he said. 'I'm surprised at you, Cora—*and your pal behind you*.'

It was a very old trick; but the old ones still come off at times. For an instant the girl instinctively half-turned her head to see what it was he was talking about. Only an instant, but it was long enough. Lanning moved like lightning. He picked up a cushion from the bed and hurled it at her.

It knocked the gun out of her unready hand and as it rattled away on to the floor he closed with her. Cora had many qualities undoubtedly, but she didn't know the tricks of in-fighting that Lanning knew. Still, before he had got the thing under control she managed to slap him three times across the face as hard as she could.

'Temper, temper,' he said, and began to put the twisting pressure on her arm which by this time he had got into the right position.

She very soon stopped slapping and started to scream.

'That's better,' Lanning told her grimly, 'and there's plenty more of that to come if you don't behave yourself, my beauty.'

With the aid of a sheet, two large handkerchiefs and a couple of scarves which he got by ransacking a chest of drawers he dealt with Cora exactly as Gerald Cockburn had been dealt with; and within five minutes she was trussed on the second chair gagged and helpless.

Lanning surveyed his handiwork, pleased with it.

'Sorry to inconvenience you, Cora my pet,' he said. 'But you've been rather a naughty girl, haven't you?' She couldn't answer; but she could still look at him and if ever a woman's eyes had murderous hate in them hers did.

Lanning next turned his attention to Gerald Cockburn and was dismayed to find that he had fainted. He dragged the chair with the unconscious man on it near to the window and threw the sash up to let some fresh air in.

Whoever had trussed Gerald up had made a job of it and Lanning's attention was so concentrated on undoing the series of savage knots that he never even heard the front door being softly opened.

The first thing he knew was the sound of feet in the doorway of the room. He glanced up and his heart jumped a bit. There they were, two of them: one man he didn't know, an ugly powerful customer who looked like an ex-pug, and 'green trousers' who seemed to have recovered.

Lanning bitterly regretted that he had left Cora's gun lying on the floor and had not slipped it into his pocket …

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PART FOUR

THE SINISTER HOUSE

Dennis Wheatley

For a moment no one moved. Lanning was staring into the eyes of ‘green trousers’’ companion. They were shrewd, clever eyes, with networks of tiny wrinkles round their corners. His bulk and ugliness suggested the ex-pug; but Lanning decided that he had brain as well as brawn and might even be the Big Shot of the outfit.

Gerald, still unconscious and partially tied to the chair, was between the two thugs and Lanning. It took Lanning only a second to decide that he would stand little chance against the big man plus ‘green trousers’. As they came at him he gave Gerald a violent shove. The chair went over sideways with a crash.

Swinging round, he dived for the open window. Behind him he heard a second crash and a spate of curses. The big man had taken a header across Gerald and ‘green trousers’ had been tripped up by the chair legs.

Squirming over on to his tummy, Lanning thrust out his feet, grabbed the window-sill and hung from it. As his pursuers scrambled to their knees he let go. The drop gave him a nasty jolt, but the area was not a deep one.

Regaining his balance, he dashed up its six steps to the street. It was now fully dark, and as he ran off he glimpsed two heads, still mouthing curses, thrust out of the lighted window.

After fifty yards he brought his pace down to a quick walk, and his agitated mind began to grapple with the problem of what to do. A drink while he deliberated was clearly indicated, so he made his way through several side streets to ‘The Bells’.

In the buffet he was on the point of ordering a double whisky, but his thirst was such that it would have needed several to quench it, and he knew that if he got tight he might easily make a fool of himself.

Beer would only dull his mind and if ever there was a time when it needed stimulating this was it. This, too, if ever there was one, was an occasion to damn expense; so he ordered a quart of champagne, a lobster, salad and brown bread and butter.

Having drunk a third of the bottle straight off, he felt better and began to concentrate. He hoped that he had not injured Gerald by throwing him over in front of the thugs, but if he had it could not be helped. Anyhow he felt little sympathy for Gerald, because he had brought his lovely sister into this desperate business without even asking her consent, and now landed her in a situation of acute danger.

The set-up, as Lanning saw it, was that Gerald had brought back from America some secret formula which the agents of a foreign power were prepared to go to any lengths to obtain. For some reason unknown the rash young fool had involved his sister in an attempt to trick them with dud papers; so presumably he had safely delivered the real ones to his firm.

But the idiot had walked straight into the gang's headquarters and they now held him prisoner. They had already beaten him up, evidently in an attempt to extract his secret from him, and would probably continue to do so.

Worse, infinitely worse: if he refused to talk they might start beating up that slender, blue-eyed piece of loveliness named Enid, in front of him, as a means of making him open his mouth.

Little beads of cold perspiration began to break out on Lanning's forehead at the thought, and he felt slightly sick. Quickly he took another swig of champagne. His instinct was to abandon the lobster—which he was eating without being conscious of its flavour—and rush out to do something; but he checked it, knowing that Enid's best hope of rescue lay in his making no move until he could act on a properly thought-out plan.

The obvious course seemed to be to go at once to the police; but there was the unnerving thought that they might be after him for murder. The porter at the flats had seen him go off with Gerald's suitcase and the police, evidently regarding him as No. 1 suspect, had chased him into the park.

Between them they must have a fair description of him, which by now would have been circulated to all stations. But they did not know his name or address, so providing he kept clear of them he had a fair chance of evading arrest. On the other hand if he went to them he would have to prove his innocence, and that might not be easy.

Gerald might confess to the killing and plead self-defence. But the man had been hit on the back of the head, so if Gerald feared that he might hang for the crime he would probably deny all knowledge of it.

Lanning saw, too, that Enid, having been with him when they found the body, did not necessarily let him out. If she thought that the brother whom she adored was going to be charged with murder she might not tell the truth. Women, Lanning knew, were completely unscrupulous where their affections were concerned.

He had known Enid for only a few hours and had no reason at all to suppose that she had fallen for him at first sight in the way he had for her. Therefore, it was quite on the cards that, greatly as it would distress any decent girl to do so, she might decide to sacrifice him in order to save her idiot brother.

Having decided that he dared not put his neck in a noose by going to the police, Lanning wondered for a moment if he had not better abandon the whole business and go into hiding until

matters had sorted themselves out. But only for a moment. He positively could not face the thought of leaving that entrancing girl at the mercy of thugs who might even now be torturing her.

In vain he sought for some way to save her without further embroiling himself, but he knew already there was only one thing for it. He must go back to the house and try to rescue her.

He would have to break in somehow and he needed a weapon. Pouring out the last of the champagne gave him an idea about that. Having finished his wine he asked the girl behind the buffet for a newspaper and a piece of string, telling her with a smile that he meant to take the bottle home as they made excellent stands for lampshades.

Ten minutes' walk' brought him back to Farley Street. From the opposite pavement he inspected No. 8. No lights showed in any of the windows. He noticed then that there was a 'To Let' board outside No. 9. There were no curtains, so evidently the house was empty.

Walking back to the end of the street and round the corner he came upon a narrow alley. The small gardens of the houses in Farley Street backed upon it. Turning up the alley he counted the houses until he came to the garden wall behind No. 9.

Unwrapping his parcel he tied the string round the neck of the empty bottle, then made a loop by which the bottle dangled from his neck. After a

quick look round to make certain that no one was about, he grasped the top of the six-foot wall, scrambled up on to it, and jumped down on the far side. Then he unbolted the door in the wall in case he had to make a quick get-away.

Now that he was over the wall, he could see that the back of No. 8 was in darkness; so it seemed that its occupants had either gone early to bed or left the house. At the latter thought a sudden queasy feeling surged up from the pit of his stomach. The thugs, fearing that having escaped he would bring the police on the scene, might have doped their prisoners and taken them to some other hide-out.

Spurred on by this new anxiety, he ploughed swiftly through a sea of weeds and reached the back of No. 9. A quick examination showed him that all the windows were fastened; so he had to break one with the butt end of his bottle.

The falling glass seemed to make an appalling din, and he paused for a moment, his heart hammering apprehensively from fear that someone must have heard it.

Only the distant rumble of a bus and the amorous snarling of two cats broke the stillness of the night, so he undid the catch, pushed up the window and clambered inside. There was just enough light for him see that he was in an empty scullery. Although there was little chance of him being discovered in an untenanted house, instinctively he crossed it as quickly as he could.

It gave on to a kitchen and beyond that was a narrow hallway. There, it was pitch dark, but by flicking on his cigarette lighter for a moment, he located the staircase.

A few paces brought him to it. Laying a hand on the banisters he fumbled his way round to its lowest stair and began the ascent. The noise of his footfalls on the bare boards seemed to echo through the whole house, and its emptiness gave him an eerie feeling. He was breathing heavily as he mounted the third flight, but he was so obsessed with anxiety about Enid that he did not pause when he reached the top landing.

Three doors faced on to it. The first he opened gave on to a small bare room. The second led to a closet and contained the skylight for which he was looking. Two minutes later he was out on the roof.

Crouching down to lessen the likelihood of his silhouette against the night sky being seen by someone at a neighbouring window, he made his

way past a chimney stack to the roof of No. 8, found the similar skylight there and gently prised it open. The closet below was in use as a box-room, and he lowered himself cautiously on to the lid of a large trunk.

Now that he had entered enemy territory he knew that the least noise might prove his undoing. Tiptoeing over to the door, he turned the handle and eased it wide enough to peer through. Dimly he could make out the banisters of the landing.

Unslinging his bottle he grasped it by the neck, slipped through the door and drew it to behind him. Out on the landing he paused to listen. No sound reached him—until, yes, a sort of whispering; a faint sobbing.

His heart began to hammer wildly. He had felt certain that if Enid was still in the house they would have confined her either in the basement or an attic. His luck was in. Still moving like a shadow, he eased open the door from behind which the sobbing came. The room was in darkness, so he switched on the light, and there was his lovely Enid lying tied down on a truckle-bed.

With frantic fingers he untied her and she sat up. She was sobbing still, but now with relief. Instinctively he put his arms round her to lift her off the bed. Her arms closed round his neck. Suddenly his mouth was on hers. Her clasp tightened and, joy of joys, she returned his passionate kiss.

‘Quick now!’ he whispered breathlessly, as they drew apart. ‘Don’t make a sound! All explanations later. We must get out while the going is good.’

‘Gerald!’ she breathed. ‘He’s in the house somewhere. We must find him.’

‘No!’ Lanning said firmly. ‘They may be down there. It would be mad to risk it.’

She shook her head violently and her firm little chin stuck out. ‘We must! We’ve got to! They may kill him. Leave me if you like; but I refuse to go without him.’

‘You’re crazy!’ Lanning said in a fierce whisper. ‘There are three of them and they have guns. How the hell d’you expect me to overcome them with only a champagne bottle?’

‘They … they may not hear us,’ Enid argued, a little uncertainly.

‘What a hope! Come on now! Your brother got himself into this and—’

‘But he didn’t. He told me in the taxi on the way here. It was the F.B.I. men who persuaded him to lay the trap.’

‘Then we can leave it to the F.B.I. men to get him out.’

‘He can’t! He’s … but never mind that now. Please, please let’s creep downstairs and find Gerald. I won’t go without him. I swear I won’t!’

Enid’s low voice and big blue eyes were equally imploring. As Lanning stared at her he felt himself weakening. That rapturous kiss had proved his undoing and for others like it he was now prepared to commit pretty well any folly. All against his better judgment, he compromised.

‘Before I agree to risk my neck down there, I want to know more about the game we’re playing.’

‘All right. This is what Gerald told me. When he was in America he found he was being shadowed, so he went to the police. They identified the people who were watching him as Communist agents; then put him in touch with an F.B.I. man named Tomlin, who had succeeded in planting himself as a member of their cell.

‘Tomlin got himself assigned the job of stealing Gerald’s papers on the way back to England. When they arrived at the airport Tomlin was met by a man named Radek. He is the big brute downstairs.

‘Tomlin reported that he had failed so far, but had the situation well in hand, as he had made friends with Gerald on the plane. He said Gerald had told him that as it was a Saturday he was going straight down to my cottage. That was part of a plan they had hatched together to locate the headquarters of the London cell.

Gerald did come straight down to the country. He made up the dud packet and gave it to me; then late at night he returned to London and popped the real papers into the late deposits box at his bank.’

‘Gaily taking a chance that you might be beaten up or murdered, eh?’ Lanning put in angrily.

‘No. It’s not fair to say that. Tomlin had phoned him that Radek was leaving the job in his hands, so I was in no danger. Anyhow, Tomlin reported again on Sunday that on Saturday night he had sneaked up to the cottage and spent two hours listening at an open window, and that he had heard Gerald tell me to keep the packet till he telephoned.

‘He excused himself for not having raided the cottage after Gerald left by saying that I had friends staying with me, who would have proved too many for him; but he added that he meant to tap the telephone wire where it runs through a wood at the bottom of our garden. After Gerald had telephoned last night, Tomlin let Radek know that I was to bring the packet to the library this afternoon.’

‘I see. So your loving brother had no scruples about using you as bait for these wolves!’

Enid’s blue eyes flashed. ‘Don’t be stupid! He intended to get there first and tip me off to give up the packet without any fuss; then he and Tomlin meant to shadow whoever was sent for it back to the cell’s headquarters. It was the thug getting into Gerald’s flat that prevented them carrying out their plan.’

‘What happened to you in the park?’

‘Directly Gerald could get away he dashed off to the library. Not finding me there he rushed back. He was just in time to spot me going through the park gates with Valdo trailing me.’

‘D’you mean green trousers?’

‘Yes. That’s the little swine’s name. Gerald promptly trailed him. When I’d gone about a quarter of a mile I glanced back and saw that Gerald as well as Valdo were following me. Gerald seized the opportunity to signal me towards a coppice.

‘I had hardly entered it when Valdo caught me up. But Gerald was hot on his heels, took him by the scruff of the neck and gave him a terrific beating.’

‘Good for Gerald.’

‘Then he told Valdo that he could choose between taking us to his headquarters or being handed over to the police for assaulting me and complicity in … in all sorts of other things. Valdo caved in, although I suppose he knew that he would be leading us into a hornets’ nest.

‘Outside the park we got a taxi and drove here. From what I had told Gerald he assumed that the whole bunch must be out at Richmond, and that this was a fine chance to raid their headquarters while it was empty. We let ourselves in with Valdo’s key.

‘Radek was at home and with him there was a vicious harpy called Cora. He knocked out poor Gerald, then they brought me up here.’

As she finished a smile twitched Lanning’s lips. He knew he was in for it now, but felt entitled to say his piece before facing further dangers. In a whisper he said:

‘You must have guessed that I’ve fallen in love with you. Wild horses wouldn’t get me downstairs otherwise.’

She nodded, and the colour rose to her cheeks. ‘I know. The way you kissed me told me that. I’ve no right to ask you anything; but if you’ll come

down with me I—well, I'd like to have you as a special friend, anyway.'

'Bless you! But there's no question of your going down. I won't allow you to risk being caught. I came in by way of an empty house next door and through the skylights. That is the way you are going out; and you are going this minute.'

She began to protest, but he cut her short. 'No arguments. Unless you obey me I'm not playing.'

Taking her by the arm, he led her across the landing to the box-room, and helped her up through the skylight. As they crossed the roofs together he told her of the way out through the scullery window and back gate. They arranged that she should go to the Sloane Court Hotel and wait for him there in the lounge.

If he failed to join her within an hour, she was to go to the police. He disliked that idea intensely, yet saw no alternative but to agree to it. As he lowered her through the skylight of No. 9 they kissed again, and with his senses swimming from that delicious contact he made his way back into No. 8.

Once more grasping his bottle by the neck, he crept stealthily down the stairs. After each dozen steps he paused to listen, but no sound broke the stillness. It seemed unnatural unless the thugs had all left the house and taken Gerald with them.

Yet he thought it unlikely they would have done that and left Enid behind. At any moment he expected a door to open and find himself fighting for his life, but with rising hopes he reached the ground floor.

Tiptoeing to the room from which he had escaped, he gripped the door handle firmly and turned it back. No light showed as he opened it half an inch, so he pushed it wide and went in.

The curtains were now drawn, but enough light from a street lamp percolated above and below them for him to see that Gerald was still there, although not tied to a chair. He was lying in an unnatural attitude on the bed.

Swiftly, Lanning drew in his breath. He feared now that Gerald was dead, but a quick examination showed that his unnatural attitude was due to the way he had been tied to the bed and gagged. Three minutes' hard work were enough to free him, but when he sat up he could hardly mutter his gratitude on account of his strained and bruised mouth.

‘Never mind the thanks,’ whispered Lanning. ‘We’ve got to get out of here, and the sooner the better. I take it Radek, Valdo and Cora are asleep in the rooms above us. Come quietly; the least noise might rouse them.’

Gerald shook his head and muttered, ‘No. After you got away they beat me up again—trying to get things out of me. I would not give. They said then they were going out for a late supper, that when they got back they’d start in on another session … and … and bring Enid into it, too. They can’t be back yet.’

‘Come on then!’ urged Lanning. ‘You’ve no need to worry about Enid. She’s out of it already.’

‘Thank God for that!’ gasped Gerald, heaving himself to his feet. ‘Let’s go! If they catch us they are capable of murder.’

As they reached the door Lanning said with a trace of asperity: ‘Talking of murder, I hope you’ve got good grounds for justifying the one you did yourself.’

‘What the hell d’you mean?’ Gerald snapped back. ‘I haven’t murdered anyone.’

It was at that moment that the front door opened. The light was snapped on; Cora, Valdo and Radek filled the entrance.

As Radek slammed the door behind him Lanning sprang. Lifting his bottle high he brought it down on Valdo’s head. Once again the green velvet slacks buckled at the knees. With a long eerie moan their wearer slumped across the hallway.

Gerald made an attempt to grab Cora, but she was too quick for him. Jumping back she pulled her little gun from a pocket in her skirt and fired. The bullet smashed his kneecap. Uttering a scream of pain he pitched forward on to Valdo.

‘Stop shooting, you silly bitch,’ snarled Radek, ‘or you’ll have the police on us!’ But Lanning, too, had views about her gun. His left fist was half-way to her jaw before her chief had got his words out. As the blow landed her head smacked back against the wall and she crumpled up.

Radek launched himself on Lanning and they went down together. For two whole minutes they strove desperately for mastery, squirming and twisting in violent combat. Then Lanning had a lucky break. His hand came in contact with the bottle he had been forced to drop. Snatching it up he smashed it over Radek’s head.

As he staggered to his feet he judged that all three of the enemy were out of business for at least 10 minutes; but Gerald was in a bad way. He was groaning pitifully, and quite incapable of walking. Picking him up, Lanning carried him out on to the doorstep, deposited him there, pulled the front door shut, and said:

‘Hang on, old chap. I won’t be long. I’m going to fetch a taxi. We’ll get you to the hospital in no time.’ Then he set off at a run down the street.

In the Kings Road he found several taxis on the rank. A constable was chatting to the cabby at the head of the line. As Lanning ran up, the policeman gave him a casual glance. Suddenly his eyes widened, and he said:

‘Would you mind telling me your name, sir?’

Lanning’s heart seemed to turn to ice; but he managed to make his voice sound indifferent as he replied: ‘It’s Brownjohn; but I can’t think what that has to do with you.’

‘Only a matter of interest, sir,’ said the officer quietly. ‘But it happens that you answer the description of a man who is wanted in connection with a murder that took place at Richmond this afternoon. I must ask you to accompany me to the station.’

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PART FIVE

THE SINISTER CLOCK

L. P. Hartley

‘I might make a bolt for it,’ Lanning thought. He glanced round. Besides the rank of taxis, each with its driver, there were plenty of people about, as there always are in the King’s Road. It was dark, of course, which would be a help; but the chances were too much against him.

‘All right, officer,’ he said, and at the time he meant it. But as he was walking at the policeman’s side, trying to sort out his thoughts, he looked up and saw that they were passing the street that led to Farley Street.

All at once he remembered Gerald, whom he had left helpless on the steps of Number Eight, with a promise to come back. And he remembered Enid at the Sloane Court Hotel, also waiting for him, not knowing what to do. He had told her to call up the police if he didn’t come in an hour’s time, but would she do that? She didn’t want to get mixed up with the police any more than he did.

Why should he yield up his liberty to this elderly, lumbering constable? He might be kept for hours at the station, he might even be charged with murder. And scarcely had the thought crossed his mind when he gave the policeman a sharp push outwards into the roadway.

He saw the man lurch, topple and heard him fall, but by that time he was half-way across the street, making for a passage that opened on the other side. Surprised faces were turned towards him; he heard a shout or two, and footsteps coming after him; but nothing concerted, no hue and cry. The passage led into another street, less frequented and much darker; he doubled down it, took one turning after another, and then slacked off into a running walk. Presently he stopped, and as he did so another sound, that was like an echo of his own footsteps, stopped, too.

He started off again at full speed, trying not to listen for the other footsteps.

At last he espied a deep doorway, almost a porch, and plunged into it, pressing his back against the projecting wall.

The pursuing footsteps came to a halt outside his shelter, a torch shone into his face and a voice said:

‘I saw you get away from him, but you won’t get away from me. I have your description, too, and I must ask you to accompany me to the station.’

Lanning could see little of the man except that he was wearing ordinary clothes.

‘Who are you?’ he gasped, still breathless.

‘A policeman. Here’s my warrant.’ He took a card out and flashed his torch on it.

‘All right,’ said Lanning for the second time. ‘I’ll come.’

He fell into step beside the policeman.

The fight was out of him by now, he didn’t think of running away. Instead, he felt enormously relieved.

From the first he had wanted to call in the police; only Enid’s unwillingness had stopped him and what a short-sighted policy it had been! Half of their troubles came from it. Now she was safe, that was the main thing. At the hotel nobody could harm her; his thoughts could dwell on her as comfortably as if he was actually with her, and he did not try to stop them dwelling.

A wave of irrational optimism swept over him; everything was all right now. And with his feeling of relaxation and security came an overpowering fatigue, as if, with the removal of the nervous strain, all the physical efforts he had made during the day were taking their toll of him. But it was a delicious tiredness, quenching thought and worry.

‘I’ve no idea where we are. Is it far to the station?’ he asked the policeman in a friendly way.

‘About seven minutes’ walk.’

‘They won’t keep me long, will they?’

‘That depends,’ said the policeman, rather grimly.

For a moment Lanning’s optimism wobbled, as his hopes of joining Enid grew less rosy.

‘They’ll let me telephone, won’t they?’

‘If the reasons are held to be sufficient,’ said the policeman ponderously, ‘yes. Under supervision, of course.’

‘The thing is,’ said Lanning, with a rush of confidence. ‘I’ve got a … a material witness. She’s at the Sloane Court Hotel, as a matter of fact.’

‘I should say there would be no difficulty,’ said the policeman.

So that was all right, too. With a deepening sense of security Lanning walked along beside the policeman. He had seldom in his life felt the need of protection, but now he was glad of it. Then, in a flash, he remembered something that punctured his serenity completely.

How could he have forgotten it, when it had been the means of bringing him into his present plight? Gerald, slumped on the doorstep of No. 8—Gerald, whom he had promised to take to hospital,

In the midst of his contrition and dismay, Lanning felt a twinge of irritation at the thought of Gerald. It was Gerald who had got them all into this mess.

Gerald, with his silly, practical joke, and his sillier plan of raiding the headquarters in Farley Street. If Gerald hadn’t been Enid’s brother, if she hadn’t been so devoted to him …

But rescued he must be.

For a moment Lanning again entertained the idea of trying to give his captor the slip. But his fatigue weighed him down, and, besides, they were now recrossing the King’s Road, with its barrage of lights and traffic and pedestrians.

He wondered what his position as a suspect was. Would they charge him at the police station or would they just interrogate him? Before, only Enid’s danger had been real to him, now he began to think of his own. In any case the policeman would not let him out of his sight until they reached their destination.

There was only one thing to do—he must take the man into his confidence. He had already done so to some extent. Was it wise? The policeman hadn’t cautioned him, which was encouraging; they only cautioned one after a charge had been made.

‘Officer,’ he said.

‘Yes?’ said the policeman.

‘When you … you pinched me’—Lanning fumbled for the right word and wondered if he had got it—‘I had been, as a matter of fact, looking for a taxi to take a friend of mine to hospital. He … he’s been injured.’

‘Where is he?’ asked the policeman.

‘In Farley Street. As a matter of fact, he was pretty badly knocked about. As a matter of fact, I left him on the doorstep. As a matter …’ He bit back the idiotic phrase which kept springing to his lips, so anxious was he to convince the policeman of the truth of what he was saying and of the urgency of Gerald’s need. He felt sure the policeman would say that the matter could wait until they reached the police station, but to Lanning’s surprise he said:

‘We can take him on the way. The station’s in Farley Street.’

Lanning could scarcely believe his luck. That the bobby should prove so tractable! And that the station should be in Farley Street! How ironical but how helpful!

‘Shall we get a taxi now?’ he suggested.

‘Not worth it,’ the policeman said. ‘The next turning leads into Farley Street. It’s only a short street. We’ll do what we can to make him comfortable and then we’ll call an ambulance.’

After the animation of the King’s Road the purlieus of Farley Street seemed dead, dark and deserted. Lanning could hear their joint footsteps echoing on the pavement.

‘This chap of yours,’ said the policeman suddenly, ‘do you happen to know how he came by his injuries?’

Lanning hesitated. He wondered if the question was in order; he wondered still more how to answer it.

‘Some thugs set about him,’ he said at last.

‘Have you any idea who the persons concerned might be?’ the policeman asked.

Again Lanning hesitated. It would all have to come out before long, and to prevaricate, or not to answer, would arouse the policeman’s suspicions. As a man he felt he could trust him, but could he trust him as a policeman? That had been his difficulty in talking to him all along.

‘It was a rough house,’ he said briefly, ‘and they beat him up. I—I got away.’

‘They would have beaten you up, too?’ the policeman said.

‘Yes, if I’d let them.’ Lanning thought with some complacency of the precious trio he had temporarily laid out, and wondered what sort of shape they were in now.

‘Could you identify them?’ the policeman asked. Again Lanning hesitated, but why not tell him? He had nothing to be ashamed of in the part he had played.

‘There was a big square-faced chap and a slim-built willowy article in green cords, and a china-faced little thing called Cora. She was the worst of the bunch.’

‘I believe I know them,’ said the policeman. ‘I believe I know them,’ he repeated. ’A nasty crowd … Well, here we are in Farley Street. What was your number?’

‘Eight.’

Lanning peered down the ill-lit street. ‘I don’t see your blue lamp,’ he observed.

‘It’s at the other end,’ the policeman said. ‘We’re coming to it.’

He began to flash his torch on the numbers of the houses: Fourteen, Thirteen, Twelve … it was difficult to see far in front, and the doorways were in shadow.

The policeman stopped. ‘This is Number Eight all right,’ he said. ‘But where’s your man?’

Where indeed? There was no sign of Gerald.

Lanning’s thoughts whirled. Had he crawled away? But how could he, with his injured knee? Had some passer-by picked him up? Perhaps, but in this street passers-by were scarce. Had he—? The third possibility was too horrible to contemplate.

‘They may have taken him inside,’ said the policeman, matter-of-factly, voicing Lanning’s fears.

‘I ought by rights to take you to the station,’ he added, meditatively, ‘but if I went in now I might nab the lot.’ He looked hard at Lanning. ‘What do you say? It’s the citizen’s duty to help the police.’

‘I’m quite ready,’ Lanning said.

He did not have to remind himself that he had been here before; but this time it was the policeman who knocked and rang. He knocked several times; the sound filled the street and beat inside Lanning’s tired head like a physical pain. But no footsteps approached the door. ‘Seems they’re all dead,’ the policeman remarked. ‘Let’s try the bell.’ Lanning was impressed by his coolness, but then he did not know what it was like inside. The summons on the bell remained unanswered.

Lanning and the policeman exchanged glances and Lanning wondered if he should tell him of the route through the house next door. But try as he would to get back his old energy he couldn't, and was content to leave the initiative to his ally. 'Let's see if this will fetch them,' said the policeman suddenly.

He stooped down and raising the flap of the letter-box with his finger, whistled three times through it. They both drew back and the policeman said, 'If they open the door, follow me straight in and stop when I stop.' As he spoke a gleam of light appeared through the slit of the letter-box, and footsteps were heard coming to the door. It opened a crack. The policeman did not wait but pushed it and plunged in, with Lanning hard at his heels. Under the hall light the policeman stopped.

In the doorway of the room opposite, which was now lit up, Cora and Radek were standing, astonishment on their faces, Lanning sensed rather than saw the green-trousered Valdo between him and the street door. His mind a blank he awaited the policeman's next move, but all the policeman said was—

'Well, I've brought him in, you see.'

The next thing Lanning was aware of was a sound, he hadn't heard for a long time—laughter. A grunting chuckle from Radek, a histrionic silvery peal from Cora, and a snigger from Valdo, behind him.

'Welcome to the station!' said the policeman pushing him into the room. 'The station's what we call it, though I dare say it's not the kind of station you were expecting. Some people call it a cell—it's that, too.'

As Lanning stumbled into the room he heard another sound that wasn't laughter. It was something between a sob and a moan, and came from Gerald, who was tied to a chair, the blood still oozing from his untended knee. His eyes, which had lit up at the sight of Lanning, were now fixed on the policeman. He raised his head, drew a gasping breath and said just audibly:

'That's the man who did it, Lanning. I … I know him. He's the mur …' His voice trailed away, his head drooped, and he seemed to have fainted.

Lanning had a wristwatch but he could not tell the time because his hands were out of sight. They were tied together, not in the approved fashion behind his back but behind another back—the back of a grandfather clock. His ankles were secured to its feet and a cord round his neck kept his face

pressed against its face—or rather, against the glass door that protected is face. He seemed to be embracing the clock.

The clock was not going. It had been pulled away from the wall and used for its present purpose because there was no other piece of furniture in the room suitable for tying Lanning to. All the chairs were in possession of the gang, excepting for the chair that was in possession of Gerald.

One thing that perhaps they hadn't reckoned with was that the clock-face acted as a mirror. Except where his own face blotted out the reflection he could see most of the room, which was brilliantly lit by an unshaded bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. But it didn't help him much.

They seemed to have forgotten about him and Gerald, or they wanted to give the impression that they had. They were sipping their drinks and chatting casually about other matters, referring to people by Christian names and nicknames which meant nothing to Lanning.

But presently the pseudo-policeman, who answered to the name of Mike, stretched himself and said with a yawn:

'Well, what are you going to do with this lot?'

Cora at once rose to her feet and stood with her back to the empty fireplace.

'First of all we want the Cockburn woman,' she said. 'Perhaps Mr Lanning can tell us where she is.'

'I've no idea,' said Lanning promptly. His breath misted the glass in front of the clock-face and the room grew dim.

'You can speak when you're spoken to,' Cora said. 'It would be nice if she was here.'

'I rather think that Lanning does know where she is,' said Mike. 'He told me he had an important witness waiting for him at the Sloane Court Hotel and he wanted to ring her up. I promised him he should.'

Lanning's blood ran cold.

'I don't want to now,' he muttered sullenly.

'You hear?' said Cora. 'He doesn't want to. He doesn't want to telephone to Enid. Well, one of us must.'

At this Valdo undulated up with a rustle of his corduroy trousers, and went to Cora's side

'Yes,' he said, 'but she'd recognise our voices. She'd certainly recognise mine.' He tittered.

'And mine, too,' admitted Cora. 'I said a few things to her.'

‘I didn’t say much,’ grunted Radek. ‘I did a bit.’

How Lanning hated him.

‘You wouldn’t pass for an Englishman, anyhow,’ said Cora. ‘What about you Mike? Would she come to your call?’

Mike shook his head. ‘She’d know my voice,’ he said. ‘I’ve met her with her brother. We were by way of being chums.’ He laughed and Gerald stirred uneasily in his chair. ‘We used to do experiments together. Why not try another. Make Gerald telephone to his sister—she’d come all right then.’

‘Gerald!’ cried Cora sharply.

Gerald opened his eyes, drew a breath or two, and whispered faintly, ‘Yes?’

‘I’m afraid he wouldn’t be much good on the telephone,’ said Cora briskly, ‘she wouldn’t hear him. No, Lanning’s the man. Lanning!’ she barked out.

It was extraordinary what a crack she could put into her silvery voice. ‘We’re asking you to phone Enid, to ask her to come here at once.’

Why?’ asked Lanning.

‘Don’t you want to see her?’ Cora countered. ‘Aren’t you tired of hugging that clock? Wouldn’t you rather hug her?’

‘And if I refuse?’

Then we shall try to persuade you,’ said Cora, in a business-like way. ‘You can have two minutes to decide.’

Lanning stared at the motionless clock-face. He knew it now by heart. There was the full moon grinning down at him, and above, in the semi-circle below the frame, the picture of an idyllic milk-maid with her cow, set in a sylvan landscape.

The two minutes didn’t matter, the time of day, or night, didn’t really matter. If only he knew how long it was since he and Enid parted! That hour—the hour that must elapse before she called the police in—now seemed the framework of his life. And it was a lost hour, adrift in time. He couldn’t locate it. He didn’t know when it began, or when it would end.

He had no standard, no fixed point to measure it by. Sometimes it seemed a lifetime since he had left her, sometimes only a few minutes. Sometimes he thought he might have to wait half an hour for rescue, sometimes he thought the moment for rescue was long past. One thing he knew: he could not take the risk of bringing Enid here, without her escort, before the hour was up. They would dictate his messages at the pistol point, they would—

‘Well?’ snapped Cora.

‘The answer is no,’ said Lanning.

They made no answer and their faces didn’t change, but Mike and Radek, who were still sitting, got up and the four of them closed slowly on him. He caught the glint of Cora’s gun and from the way they held their hands he thought they all were armed.

‘You’ve got the one with the hair-trigger, haven’t you, Mike?’ said Cora. ‘You know how to fix it. Do you want a chair?’

‘No, I can reach,’ said Mike.

‘Here’s the thread then.’

From an ashtray on the chimney-piece she produced two short lengths of thread, each with a loop at either end.

Fascinated, Lanning watched Mike pass a loop of each thread round the trigger of the little pistol.

Bumping against Lanning as if he was not there Mike stretched up and slipped the pistol through one of the apertures below the central ball that crowned the clock. Its muzzle pointing straight at Lanning’s forehead, it looked like a vicious little bird. Stretching higher, Mike passed the two threads round the shank of the ball, whence they hung loosely downwards.

‘Now, one for the hand and one for our friend’s neck,’ said Mike.

He worked quickly. Including the untying and retying of the cord round Lanning’s neck, the whole operation only took a few minutes.

An adjustment was made to the clock-face; the glass door was pulled out a little to allow one of the threads to pass under it, and wedged with a matchbox. ‘Before I put off the safety-catch,’ said Mike, who was clearly enjoying himself, ‘I’d better explain.

‘This loop goes round the minute-hand. You follow? In about five minutes the hand will pull it tight and the gun will go off. You follow? The other thread, attached to your necklace, will also fire the gun if you put pressure on it, so I advise you to stand very still, Mr Lanning. You’re sure you follow? Now before I put off the safety catch—’

‘You’ve forgotten one thing, Mike,’ said Cora quietly.

‘What?’

‘The clock’s not going.’

They laughed; Mike swore, and still treating Lanning as an adjunct of the clock, he rocked them both until the clock ticked.

‘Now,’ said Cora, resuming control, ‘before Mike puts off the safety catch, would you like to telephone to Enid?’

Lanning’s throat went dry.

‘No,’ he said.

He didn’t look up, but he heard the catch click.

‘Any time within the next five minutes,’ Cora said, ‘you are at liberty to change your mind.’

The sound of ticking filled the room. Lanning felt the sweat stealing down his chest. ‘This is just funk,’ he told himself. ‘You’re only attached to a Heath Robinson contraption which probably wouldn’t work even if the gun was loaded, which it almost certainly isn’t. Pull yourself together.’

But, try as he would, he couldn’t persuade himself that the contraption wouldn’t work or that the gun wasn’t loaded. He watched the crinkled thread gradually straighten out as the minute-hand carried it downwards. Ten minutes past ten, the clock said; by a quarter past—

‘If you want to kill me,’ he said rather loudly, ‘why don’t you shoot me, without all this silly business?’

His breath misted the glass, but he saw Cora smile.

‘We don’t want to kill you, Mr Lanning,’ she said sweetly. ‘We only want you to change your mind. And we have found this … well, the most persuasive way. We didn’t invent it. We aren’t clever enough.

‘The Germans used it in the war—sometimes to find out things, sometimes just for fun. They were good at booby-traps. You still have about three and a half minutes to change your mind.’

‘All bluff,’ said Lanning to himself. He tried to find some flaw in the gadget’s mechanism. The gun wouldn’t go off because the thread was pulling the trigger the wrong way? But no, it wasn’t. Soon he couldn’t think; the steady ticking of the clock and the stealthy downward movement of the minute-hand seemed to paralyse his mind.

The gang were sitting down again; they had refilled their glasses and were talking desultorily. Suddenly Cora said, ‘I think it’s about time now,’ and they rose, carrying their glasses, and disposed themselves in a line against the chimney-piece, pressing their backs against it

‘Now why have they done that?’ wondered Lanning and then the answer flashed on him. They were getting out of the line of fire and, incidentally, leaving Gerald in it. So they did mean business, after all. Or was it the final build-up of the hoax?

‘There are one or two things Lanning might like to know,’ began Mike, in a sing-song voice.

‘Mike, you fool, shut up,’ hissed Cora. ‘Why tell him?’

The latent hostility between the two flared up. Mike said provocatively:

‘You needn’t listen, Cora. Put your hands over your ears, as you’re going to in a minute. If he’s thinking about that car of his I could tell him quite a lot about it. I spent an hour or two admiring it. Nice job, that Allard. Pity he won’t see it again.’

‘All bluff.’

‘And there’s something that Gerald hasn’t told you, I bet, the dirty double-crosser. He didn’t want anyone to know. The chap in his flat wasn’t a thug—he was Tomlin, the F.B.I. man. Master Gerald made a big mistake in telling me that. If he hadn’t been a pal of sorts I’d have brained him as I did Tomlin—instead of just making him late for his date at the library. They both wanted to trail us, you see. But Gerald was too trusting. So were you, Lanning. You didn’t see my police warrant was a driving licence.’

‘Just a hoax.’ But Lanning was tired of thinking that, and while Mike was droning on, relishing his triumph, an idea struck him. If it was so easy to start the clock it would be still easier to stop it.

Gently he leaned his weight against the mahogany case. The pendulum faltered, bumped once or twice, and stopped.

Mike was saying: ‘Lanning can still see Enid if he wants to. But, anyhow, we shall be seeing her later, and we’ll give her a message from him.’

He stopped and glanced at the clock. Cora made a nervous gesture, shut her eyes and put her hands over her ears. Valdo and Radek stiffened and turned away. But nothing happened. Time was not ready for them. Desperate as he was, Lanning enjoyed the anti-climax.

But it could only be a respite. He made what noise he could to drown the silence, shuffling his feet, scratching the clock’s back with his nails. Finally he burst into song—‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’—the only one he could think of, and while he was singing he had another idea.

Owing to the glass door being ajar, his forehead was some inches from the clock-face. If he ducked through the glass the shot might pass over his head.

In the silence that followed his song he heard a voice say: ‘Why, the clock’s stopped!’

With puzzled faces they moved towards the clock, Cora leading. Lanning waited till they were almost on him and then ducked.

A shot rang out. There was a hot searing sensation on his scalp. He felt the blood running down his face and wondered if he had been blinded. He heard a voice above the hubbub, ‘Cora’s hit!’ and the thud of a fallen body. But there were so many sounds, sounds outside the room, and now, it seemed, sounds inside. ‘Put the light out!’ shouted someone, and it was the last he heard before he fell, clasping the clock, unconscious to the floor.

When he came to he was still lying on the floor but Enid was beside him. There were a lot of other people too. They were walking about in a quiet and orderly way like nurses in a hospital ward. Only they weren’t nurses, they were policemen, real policemen.

‘Don’t try to talk,’ she said. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked. ‘Am I all right?’

‘Everything’s all right,’ Enid said.

She busied herself trying to make more comfortable the coat that was serving him for a pillow.

‘Tell me one thing,’ he said. ‘Did Cora—?’

Enid screwed up her face. ‘Yes, right through the heart.’

‘I didn’t know she had one,’ Lanning murmured.

‘Try not to think about it,’ Enid said.

‘What shall I think about then?’ he asked, weakly.

No one was paying them any attention. Enid bent down and kissed him.

‘Me,’ she said.

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This anthology brings together 16 forgotten tales that have either been published only once before – perhaps in a newspaper or rare magazine – or have never before appeared in print. From a previously unpublished 1917 script featuring Ernest Bramah's blind detective Max Carrados, to early 1950s crime stories written for London's Evening Standard by Cyril Hare, Freeman Wills Crofts and A.A. Milne, it spans five decades of writing by masters of the Golden Age.

Most anticipated of all are the contributions by women writers: the first detective story by Georgette Heyer, unseen since 1923; an unpublished story by Christianna Brand, creator of Nanny McPhee; and a dark tale by Agatha Christie published only in an Australian journal in 1922 during her 'Grand Tour' of the British Empire.

With other stories by Detection Club stalwarts Anthony Berkeley, H.C. Bailey, J.J. Connington, John Rhode and Nicholas Blake, plus Vincent Cornier, Leo Bruce, Roy Vickers and Arthur Upfield, this essential collection harks back to a time before forensic science – when murder was a complex business.

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Bodies from the Library 2

This second volume is a showcase for popular figures of the Golden Age, in stories that even their most ardent fans will not be aware of. It includes uncollected and unpublished stories by acclaimed queens and kings of crime fiction, from Helen Simpson, Ethel Lina White, E.C.R. Lorac, Christianna Brand, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, to S.S. Van Dine, Jonathan Latimer, Clayton Rawson, Cyril Alington and Antony and Peter Shaffer (writing as Peter Antony).

This book also features two highly readable radio scripts by Margery Allingham (involving Jack the Ripper) and John Rhode, plus two full-length novellas – one from a rare magazine by Q Patrick, the other an unpublished Gervase Fen mystery by Edmund Crispin, written at the height of his career. It concludes with another remarkable discovery: ‘The Locked Room’ by Dorothy L. Sayers, a never-before-published case for Lord Peter Wimsey!

Selected and introduced by Tony Medawar, who also provides fascinating pen portraits of each author, *Bodies from the Library 2* is an indispensable collection for any bookshelf.

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Bodies from the Library 3

This new volume in the *Bodies from the Library* series features the work of 18 prolific authors who, like Christie and Crofts, saw their popularity soar during the Golden Age. Aside from novels, they all wrote short fiction – stories, serials and plays – and although most of them have been collected in books over the last 100 years, here are the ones that got away …

In this book you will encounter classic series detectives including Colonel Gore, Roger Sheringham, Hildegarde Withers and Henri Bencolin; Hercule Poirot solves ‘The Incident of the Dog’s Ball’; Roderick Alleyn returns to New Zealand in a recently discovered television drama by Ngaio Marsh; and Dorothy L. Sayers’ chilling ‘The House of the Poplars’ is published for the first time.

With a full-length novella by John Dickson Carr and an unpublished radio script by Cyril Hare, this diverse collection concludes with some early ‘flash fiction’ commissioned by Collins’ Crime Club in 1938. Each mini story had to feature an orange, resulting in six very different tales from Peter Cheyney, Ethel Lina White, David Hume, Nicholas Blake, John Rhode and – in his only foray into writing detective fiction – the publisher himself, William Collins.

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Mystery stories have been around for centuries—there are whodunits, whydunits and howdunits, including locked-room puzzles, detective stories without detectives, and crimes with a limited choice of suspects.

Countless volumes of such stories have been published, but some are still impossible to find: stories that appeared in a newspaper, magazine or an anthology that has long been out of print; ephemeral works such as plays not aired, staged or screened for decades; and unpublished stories that were absorbed into an author's archive when they died …

Here for the first time are three never-before-published mysteries by Edmund Crispin, Ngaio Marsh and Leo Bruce, and two pieces written for radio by Gladys Mitchell and H. C. Bailey—the latter featuring Reggie Fortune.

Together with a newly unearthed short story by Ethel Lina White that inspired Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, and a complete short novel by Christianna Brand, this diverse mix of tales by some of the world's most popular classic crime writers contains something for everyone.

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Bodies from the Library 5

The Golden Age still casts a long shadow, with many of the authors who were published at that time still hugely popular today. Many of those authors also wrote short fiction, many stories of which are impossible to find: stories that appeared in a newspaper, magazine or an anthology that has long been out of print; ephemeral works such as plays not aired, staged or screened for decades; and unpublished stories that were absorbed into an author's archive when they died …

In this instalment, Tony Medawar unearths more unpublished and uncollected stories from the Golden Age of suspense, including John Bude, John Dickson Carr, Dorothy L. Sayers and Julian Symons.

Complete with fascinating biographies of all the featured authors, this volume once again brings into the daylight the forgotten, the lost and the unknown, and is an indispensable collection for any bookshelf.

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About the Authors

MICHAEL CRONIN

After publicly drawing straws to decide the order they would write in, the task of opening *Sinister Sequence* fell to the least well-known of the group, Michael Cronin. A modest man, one of the few certainties about Cronin is that that was his real name, and not the pseudonym of another writer, as has been claimed. He was born around 1907 and as a young man took part in amateur boxing competitions at cruiserweight before taking up a position at a Bristol school to teach English and History. He later joined the Royal Air Force, where he worked in the Provost Branch—the RAF's police force—meeting people who would provide inspiration for Sam Harris, a petty criminal who appears in a dozen of Cronin's novels. Eventually Cronin became what he described as an 'educationist' with the rank of Squadron Leader and based at RAF Locking in North Somerset. In his spare time, he wrote short stories, selling his first—'a boys' adventure'—for 40 guineas, which he blew on an Austin 7 car. After being demobbed from the RAF he decided to become a full-time author, writing more than sixty books and averaging two a year on the basis of around 15,000 words a week.

At his home in Bristol, Michael Cronin was a near neighbour of Geoffrey Household, and it seems possible that the two men came up with the idea of the collaboration. While Household never wrote anything else like *Sinister Sequence*, Cronin subsequently collaborated with five other writers, including John Dickson Carr and Laurence Meynell, on a novella first published in the *Daily Sketch* as a £1,000 competition: entrants to *Crime on the Coast* (1954) were invited to suggest a better title, and the authors

selected the winning entry, '*The Secret Fear of Nita Ross*'. While Cronin also wrote spy thrillers and domestic noir, his best-known novels are fast-moving 'slick, modern' thrillers with titles like *Johnny on the Spot* (1953) and *You Pay Your Money* (1954), much in the style of Edgar Wallace and Peter Cheyney, with whom Cronin was often compared. Cronin's one attempt at something entirely different was a romantic story set in Somerset which was never published. There is no authoritative source on Michael Cronin's death date.

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GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

The author of the second instalment, Geoffrey Household, was born in Bristol on 30 November 1900, the son of Beatrice and Horace Household. Geoffrey went to Durnford Preparatory School, where he would claim in later years to have been successful only for his verse. From there he went to the prestigious Clifton College, where his father had been on the teaching staff before he left to join Gloucestershire Council. Geoffrey Household was determined not to follow his father into public service and, in 1922, after coming down from Oxford with a first in English and Classics, he took up a position with the Bank of Rumania. At the American Consul's Bucharest residence he met Elisaveta Kopelanoff, a journalist, whom he would marry in June 1930. After a spell with the bank, he joined Elders & Fyffe, and began, as he put it, 'selling the Spaniards their own bananas', an experience he drew on for his early short stories, including his first, '*El Quixote del Cine*', published in the *London Mercury* in September 1929 as by 'David Hilcot'.

Towards the end of the 1920s, Household went to Los Angeles, but after his Hollywood screenwriting ambitions were frustrated he went with wife Betty to New York and took up an unfulfilling job writing entries for a junior encyclopaedia and some children's radio plays for CBS. Frustrated, he became the foreign representative for John Kidd, a manufacturer of printing ink, which took him to Europe, South America and the Middle East and gave him the breadth of experience needed to be a writer. After a long short story was accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly*, he wrote a novel, and when the result—*The Third Hour* (1935)—was very well reviewed, he decided to make writing his career. By this time, it was becoming clear that the actions of Adolf Hitler would lead to war. Household decided that 'the man had to be dealt with and I began to think how much I would love to kill him'. This 'personal vendetta' resulted in his finest work, *Rogue Male*

(1939), which was filmed twice—once by Fritz Lang as *Man Hunt* (1941) and then, more successfully, by the BBC in 1976 with Peter O'Toole as Household's hero, Robert Hunter.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Household spent six years working in the British Intelligence Corps in the Middle East, which would inspire his novel *Arabesque* (1948). During the war, he and Betty brought their never entirely stable relationship to an end and in 1942 he married his second wife, Ilona Zsoldos-Gutmán, with whom he would have three children. On being demobbed, Household returned to writing fiction, aiming daily to produce a rough draft of 700 to 1,000 words by hand between 10.30 and 1 p.m., and to type up the final draft between 5 and 7 p.m.

In 1957, the family moved to Buckinghamshire where, as well as writing, Household became involved in local issues, visiting schools to inspire young writers. In the 1960s he helped to save the rural villages of Cublington and Nuthampstead from becoming the site of London's third airport, not least by composing a campaign song, 'Sing Wing', for the jazz musicians Cleo Laine and Johnny Dankworth.

Household's many books include the horror novel *The Sending* (1980) and two picaresque thrillers, but most—in Household's own terminology—are 'adventures', the best of which are *A Rough Shoot* (1951), *Watcher in the Shadows* (1961) and *Rogue Justice* (1982), the sequel to *Rogue Male*. He also wrote many short stories and a play, 'Thy Children in Darkness', a post-apocalyptic thriller set in the 44th century, broadcast on BBC radio in 1960. In 1985, Geoffrey and Ilona moved to a farmhouse in the Cotswolds, where he tended the garden and continued to write. He died at home from heart failure on 4 October 1988.

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LAURENCE MEYNELL

The third of the *Sinister* authors, Laurence Walter Meynell, was born on 9 August 1899, the youngest child of Agnes and Herbert Meynell, chairman of a local brass-foundry. At the age of nine, he was sent away to St Edmund's, the oldest Catholic school in England, and after leaving school, he enlisted and served in the Honourable Artillery Company. After the Armistice, Meynell worked in advertising and as an estate agent, an experience he drew on for the smuggling mystery *Watch the Wall* (1934). He also taught at St Edmund's for six months between 1919 and 1920, where his roles included commanding the cadet corps.

Encouraged by his friend Ronald Knox, Meynell entered a novel-writing competition, and the result, *Mockbeggar* (1924), concerns the loves and lives of a tiresomely witty 'insufferable but desirable' young Mayfair couple, Rachel Massinger and her husband Chickie. While the book didn't win the competition, Meynell had found his vocation and became a full-time writer. To supplement his income while working on novels, Meynell wrote short stories and also wrote what would appear to be his only poetic work, *The Ballad of Penn Fields with a Plan of the Battlefield* (1927).

In 1932 Meynell married 'Ruth' Darbyshire, an Australian journalist and food-writer. The couple lived in London where they hosted networking evenings for young writers, and in 1934 they made a grand tour of Australia which provided him with ideas—and characters—for several books. On their return, they moved to Buckinghamshire. Between 1941 and 1945, Meynell served with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, eventually serving as adjutant at three Bomber Command stations, for which he was mentioned in despatches in 1944. After the war, Meynell created the character for which he is best known, the ageless private investigator Hooky Hefferman, who appears in twenty novel-length mysteries, the last being *Hooky Hooked* (1988), published just a year before Meynell's death.

The Hefferman books are a delightful blend of Wodehousian romance and light-hearted investigation, similar in some ways to the *Lovejoy* novels of Jonathan Gash.

After Ruth's death in 1955, Meynell married Joan Henley, an actress and BBC presenter. While continuing to write, Meynell worked as literary editor of *Time and Tide* magazine from 1958 to 1960, and he was active in literary circles. He chaired the Authors' Club and in 1954 served as President of the Johnson Society, a body set up to promote the life and legacy of Samuel Johnson. Over sixty years, Meynell wrote more than 150 books. As well as crime fiction under his own name, his output includes ten non-genre novels as 'Robert Eton' as well as the comic stories *Inside Out! Or Mad as a Hatter* (1934) and *Women Had to Do It!* (1936), written as 'Geoffrey Ludlow'. There are also biographies and other non-fiction, including a popular profile of the county *Bedfordshire* (1950) and *Famous Cricket Grounds* (1951). Laurence Meynell died at Hove on 18 April 1989.

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DENNIS WHEATLEY

The fourth and most famous member of the quintet was Dennis Yeats Wheatley, known as ‘the Prince of thriller writers’. Named for his grandfather, Dennis was born on 8 January 1897 at 10 Raleigh Gardens in Brixton, south-west London, the only son of Florence and Albert Wheatley, a prosperous grocer and wine merchant. He attended a prep school in Margate and, briefly, Dulwich College, from which he was expelled. Between 1908 and 1912, he completed his education while serving as a cadet on board training ship *HMS Worcester*. In September 1914, after a brief spell in Germany to learn about wine making, he joined the family firm in South Audley Street, Mayfair. However, with the outbreak of war he enlisted and eventually secured a commission with the City of London Royal Field Artillery. He later transferred to the 36th Ulster Division and fought at Cambrai and St Quentin. In July 1917, he was gassed at Passchendaele and, after being invalided out of the Army, he rejoined the family firm.

In June 1922, Wheatley married Nancy Robinson with whom he had a son, Anthony, eighteen months later. After his father’s death in 1926 Wheatley took over the grocery business, which he later sold. In 1931, he was divorced from Nancy and married for a second time to Joan Pelham Burn, a young widow who encouraged him to write and would herself write several novels under the pen-name ‘Eve Chaucer’.

Wheatley sold his first short story in 1933 and his first novel-length thriller was published, *The Forbidden Territory* (1933), set partly in the Soviet Union. Gifted with an eye for publicity, he launched the book with a party. In teams of four, the forty guests played a game of his own invention called *Crossing the Forbidden Territory*, answering questions and ‘finally dashing out of Russia by means of horses, aeroplanes and cars—toy models arranged on a long table’. Wheatley enjoyed games-playing and in later

years created several popular board games, including *Invasion* (1938) and *Blockade* (1939). His book *The Forbidden Territory* was an enormous success and the main characters—an adventurer called the Duke de Richleau and his friends—would appear in ten further novels whose plots range from spying against Nazi Germany to battling satanic cults.

After a standalone thriller about control of the global film industry, Wheatley decided to establish a second series character, Gregory Sallust, a spy who would also appear in eleven novels including *Black August* (1934), which was set in the future and, in some ways, anticipated elements of George Orwell's *1984*.

In the 1930s, true crime—though not widely known by that term—was almost as popular as thrillers and detective stories. Never one to miss an opportunity, Wheatley and his friend, Joseph Gluckstein Links, known as 'J.G.', produced a quartet of 'crime dossiers' that included physical evidence such as matchbooks and hair specimens. They were an enormous success and led to Wheatley's becoming involved in the 1938 Ideal Home Exhibition, sponsored by the *Daily Mail*. For the Exhibition, Wheatley and the designer Dorothy Braddell created eight 'Mystery Rooms', each of which represented a celebrity whose identity could be deduced from cunningly chosen and positioned clues that visitors could examine for themselves.

During the Second World War, Joan Wheatley became a driver for an MI5 officer who had been tasked with thinking about the seemingly imminent risk that the Nazis were about to invade Britain. Joan suggested that they could do worse than ask her husband for ideas and this led to Wheatley's writing a paper on *Resistance to Invasion* and, in time, others on subjects like *Village Defence* and *Aerial Warfare*. Wheatley's 'fresh, iconoclastic and challenging' thinking—which included ideas such as the removal of road signs to thwart invaders and a role in the deceptions popularised as 'Monty's Double' and 'The Man Who Never Was'—were regarded highly by military chiefs. In 1944, he became the only non-regular officer to be appointed to the Joint Planning Staff of the War Cabinet and in 1945 he was awarded the Bronze Star Medal by the American government. Wheatley would eventually describe some of his war work in *Stranger Than Fiction* (1959), and he drew on certain incidents for the Gregory Sallust novel *Traitors' Gate* (1958).

The war over, Wheatley returned to writing fiction. He began a series set in the Napoleonic era that would eventually run to a dozen titles, all featuring a British secret agent called Roger Brook. Later books included *The Devil and All His Works* (1971) and *Saturdays with Bricks* (1960), a delightful memoir on his favourite hobby. Together with collecting rare books and coins, enjoying fine wine, good food and travel with Joan, Wheatley enjoyed bricklaying and even built a 250 foot ‘crinkle crankle’ winding wall at Grove Place, their home in the New Forest. The Wheatleys had moved to the Georgian house in 1945, and in its beautiful grounds they hosted charitable events for local bodies including the church, the Conservative Association and Lymington Flower Club.

In an extraordinarily rich life, Dennis Wheatley was the author of almost eighty books, the best of which are propulsive, well-researched adventures with vividly realised characters and settings. He died on 10 November 1977 at his London home, 60 Cadogan Square in Chelsea.

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L. P. HARTLEY

The conclusion of *Sinister Sequence* was written by Leslie Poles Hartley, an author best known for stories of the supernatural and several elegiac and atmospheric novels. Hartley was born in the Cambridgeshire village of Whittlesey on 30 December 1895; his unusual middle name was his maternal grandmother's maiden name. His mother Eliza was active in local social circles and his father, Harry, was a practising solicitor who, after his retirement in 1927, became chairman of a local brickworks and a director of the local gas company. Hartley attended Harrow School, which he would later say fuelled him with 'inspiration and aspiration'. In 1914, he gained a history scholarship to Balliol, Oxford, but broke off his studies to enlist in 1916 when he joined the 4th battalion of the Norfolk Regiment. However, Hartley never saw active service and, after leaving the Army on medical grounds, he transferred to the Royal Navy.

In 1918, as a temporary sub-lieutenant in the Volunteer Reserve, he wrote and acted in various concerts to raise funds for soldiers and sailors who had been interned in Germany. When the conflict ended, Hartley completed his degree, coming down in 1921. He became editor of the *Oxford Outlook* to which he contributed numerous short stories, essays and reviews. Other stories were published in the *Oxford Chronicle* and many were collected in his first book, *Night Fears and Other Stories* (1924). He also wrote poetry, some of which appeared in *Oxford Poetry* alongside verse by, among others, Dorothy L. Sayers and C. H. B. Kitchin. He wrote a short novel about the infatuation of an American girl for a Venetian gondolier, which led critics to compare him to the American writer Henry James: in fact, *Simonetta Perkins* (1925) owed much to Hartley's own feelings and experiences during the four to five months he spent annually in Venice for many years, often with a fellow Oxford alumnus, Lord David Cecil, to whom the book is dedicated.

Although Hartley was fortunate enough to be able to live off private income, he took up a position with *The Sketch* in 1929; he remained with the magazine as its literary critic—on and off—for nearly thirty years. He also reviewed books on the radio for the BBC and for publications such as the *London Mercury*, the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review*. He also wrote many short stories, contributing regularly to various anthologies of supernatural fiction and children's stories, the best of which were edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith. During the Second World War Hartley began a trilogy of novels that drew in part on his own childhood and memories of his younger sister Norah and holidays at Hunstanton, a small Norfolk coastal town which he would later describe as his 'spiritual home'. The trilogy, infused with melancholic nostalgia, comprises *The Shrimp and the Anemone* (1944), *The Sixth Heaven* (1946) and *Eustace and Hilda* (1947), which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

By the 1950s, Hartley was widely recognised as one of Britain's finest novelists, and with *The Go-Between* (1953) he produced the novel that many regard as his masterpiece and became a memorable film, directed by Joseph Losey. In this influential novel, the central character looks back at certain events in his childhood and understands them in a way he did not at the time. While there were some personal references in *The Go-Between*, it was only with *The Brickfield* (1964) and its sequel *The Betrayal* (1967) that Hartley began truly to reveal his inner life, a process he completed with *The Harness Room* (1971). Away from work, he was a confident and passionate oarsman, first on the river Test and then on the Avon, near his home *Avondale* in Bathford, Somerset, where he regularly hosted friends. Hartley also maintained a flat in Rutland Gate in Knightsbridge, London, and this was where he died from heart failure on 13 December 1972. His ashes were scattered on the crocus lawn at Golders Green Crematorium in north London.

Sinister Sequence was first published in the *Daily Sketch* between 11 and 15 May 1953.

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